The New Criterion

November 1991

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
An Orwell for the Nineties? *by Hilton Kramer*, 4
New light on Corot *by Karen Wilkin*, 9
The career of James Baldwin *by Bruce Bawer*, 16
A very Sixties person: Peter Schjeldahl on art *by Roger Kimball*, 27
Hazlitt's passions *by Joseph Epstein*, 33
Crime and punishment *by Leszek Kolakowski*, 45
Poems *by Leslie Norris, Louis Simpson & W. S. Di Piero*, 52

Letter from Jerusalem *by Jed Perl*, 56; **Art:** Romare Bearden *by Eric Gibson*, 62
Books: *Paul Fussell* BAD *reviewed by James Bowman*, 66; *Anthony Grafton* Defenders of the text *reviewed by Paul Oskar Kristeller*, 69; *C. H. Sisson* On the look-out *reviewed by Tess Lewis*, 73; **Shorter notices** *by Donald Lyons & Bruce Bawer*, 76; **Notebook:** Leland Bell, 1922-1991 *by Jed Perl*, 79

Volume 10, Number 3, $4.75

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stuart Davis

A Selection of Paintings

November 13 to December 21

The Estate of Stuart Davis
is exclusively represented by

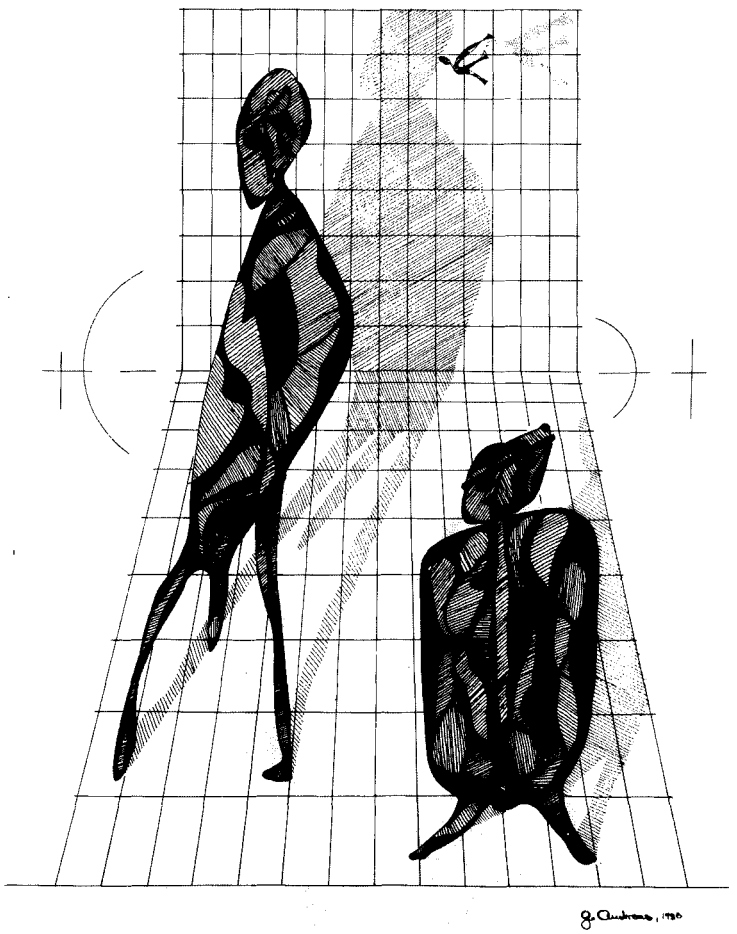
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York, NY 10021

Tel (212) 879-6606 Fax 212 744 0655

Monday - Saturday 9:30 to 5:30

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



"STUDY FOR OPEDIPAL STAGE" 23" × 17½", Ink on Paper

GEORGE ANDREAS

Paintings & Drawings

8545 LEESBURG PIKE (Rte 7)
VIENNA, VIRGINIA 22182
703-448-2222 FAX 703-356-3328

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Apulian volute krater by the White Saccos Painter, ca. 320 B. C. Height 28" (71 cm)

André Emmerich Gallery

41 East 57th Street, New York 10022 Telephone (212) 752-0124 Fax (212) 371-7345

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *November 1991*

Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Managing Editor *Christopher Carduff*
Office Manager *Marjorie Danser*

Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer is the author of *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern American Novel and Its Critics* (Graywolf Press).

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic for *The American Spectator.*

W. S. Di Piero's new book of poems, due out next spring, will be called *The Restorers* (University of Chicago Press).

Joseph Epstein's latest book is *The Goldin Boys*, a collection of short stories (Norton).

Eric Gibson is the art critic for *The Washington Times.*

Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals*, is now available in paper from Harper-Perennial.

Leszek Kolakowski teaches at Oxford and the University of Chicago and is the author of many books, including *Main Currents of Marxism* (Oxford).

Paul Oskar Kristeller, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, is the author, most recently, of *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton).

Tess Lewis's translation of Peter Handke's *Once Again for Thucydides* will be published next spring by Braziller.

Donald Lyons is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion.*

Leslie Norris is the author of *Sequences* (Gibbs Smith). "Bringing in the Selves" is a long autobiographical poem-in-progress.

Jed Perl's art chronicle, *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World*, has been published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Louis Simpson's latest book of poems is *In the Room We Share* (Paragon House).

Karen Wilkin's monograph on Anthony Caro, with photographs by John Riddy, has just been published by Prestel.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. November 1991, Volume 10, Number 3. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Copyright © 1991 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising representative: Kate Shanley, 799 Broadway, Room 226, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4905.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set with the Flexicon Composer from Emerging Technology and is printed by Science Press of Ephrata, Pennsylvania.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TATISTCHEFF

NEW YORK

NIGEL VAN WIECK

NEW WORK

NOVEMBER 2–27

50 WEST 57TH STREET

NEW YORK NY 10019

212 664 0907 FAX 212 541 8814

LOS ANGELES

KURT SOLMSSEN

PAINTINGS

THROUGH NOVEMBER 30

1547 10TH STREET

SANTA MONICA CA 90401

213 395 8807 FAX 213 394 0757

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: November 1991

The academic Left strikes back

In order to combat what are alleged to be the "false claims" and "malicious distortions" in recent conservative attacks on the prevailing academic establishment in this country, a group of tenured, high-salaried, left-wing professors in the humanities have launched yet another academic-political organization to propagate the gospel of "diversity," multiculturalism, etc., that is now dominating American campuses and classrooms. Calling themselves Teachers for a Democratic Culture, these enraged academic beneficiaries of capitalist largesse—whose numbers include Stanley Fish, Gerald Graff, Paul Lauter, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, and Jonathan Culler, among other usual suspects—have circulated a recruiting letter and call to arms that singles out as special targets "the National Association of Scholars, their corporate and foundation sponsors, and like-minded writers in the press who are endangering education with a campaign of harassment and misrepresentation."

This can only mean that the National Association of Scholars, which was organized a few years ago for the specific purpose of resisting the spread of "politically correct" doctrines in the classrooms of our colleges and universities, is at last getting a hearing in the media and having an effect on the public—the public that, directly or indirectly, pays the six-figure salaries commanded by these illustrious radical ideologues who have turned our campuses into a squalid political battleground.

It goes without saying that the attention accorded by the press to the National Association of Scholars and other critics of political correctness cannot compare with the sympathetic coverage that the media has bestowed on the academic Left. For example, *The New York Times Magazine* has lately given us serial coverage of the left-wing academic establishment in the form of profiles devoted to Richard Rorty, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Catharine A. MacKinnon, and Cornel West. In addition, the daily *Times* recently ran a friendly story about the founding of the Teachers for a Democratic Culture on its front page—something it has never done for the professors who organized the National Association of Scholars. Yet despite the uneven and often unfair coverage in the press, those who have criticized political correctness and multiculturalism on our campuses are obviously making themselves heard, and it is this breakthrough into the national consciousness that these champions of leftist orthodoxy have apparently begun to fear. Hence the launching of their new propaganda vehicle for the purposes of broadcasting their message—which isn't, to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be sure, always precisely the message that they deliver to students in the classroom —to a larger audience.

It has to be understood, of course, that these tenured radicals are already in control of many established academic organizations and distinguished humanities departments, which they have politicized to a degree heretofore unknown in American university life. The Modern Language Association, with its vast membership; the American Council of Learned Societies, with its once-prestigious reputation for supporting disinterested scholarship—these and many other leading organizations in the humanities now function largely as the political fiefdoms of Fish, Graff, Gates, and their ideological allies. From their eyries at the heights of such organizations and in humanities departments throughout the country, they determine appointments to jobs, fellowships, and the other forms of preferment and reward that our leading colleges and universities confer with such extraordinary generosity. They therefore have a large academic empire to protect, and this is the real reason that they have now formed yet another political arm to disparage their critics and obfuscate the debate that the public is just now beginning to understand.

In this respect, it was perhaps inevitable that another principal target of Teachers for a Democratic Culture would be Lynne V. Cheney, the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. For Mrs. Cheney has proved to be a formidable adversary of these militant apostles of political correctness on campus, and evidently her forceful message is also having its effect on public thinking about this question. Among much else, the recruiting letter claims that Mrs. Cheney has "proved herself consistently intolerant of any view of scholarship that does not agree with her own." But a look at the record shows that Mrs. Cheney has enthusiastically supported a wide range of academic and cultural projects. What she has consistently—and rightly—been "intolerant" of are efforts to subvert the humanities by subordinating scholarship and teaching to political imperatives.

This fundamental distinction is utterly lost on our new academic mandarins. So busy are they declaring that "everything is political" that they can no longer distinguish between an individual teacher's private political convictions and his duty to preserve the integrity of his subject. What matters—or what should matter—in the classroom is the subject to be studied, not the political agenda of the teacher or the students. Just this is what the Teachers for a Democratic Culture reject. Partisans of radical multiculturalism, they insist that we import questions of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and the like into the study of the humanities. What they refuse to recognize is that this procedure does not open up the humanities to "new perspectives," as is often claimed. On the contrary, it merely exploits the subject under discussion for the sake of cultural politics. It is for this reason that responsible persons must always reject the multicultural demand to sacrifice literature or other subjects to political attitudinizing. To do so is no more "intolerant" than it is intolerant to reject falsehoods in other areas of life. The choice is not between "traditional" or "conservative" pedagogy and something more up-to-date: it is a choice between responsible teaching and propaganda.

It is far too soon to announce that the critics of the academic Left are in retreat, for they remain in solid control of the academic study of the humanities today. But with the emergence of Teachers for a Democratic Culture we are given a clear sign that the battle had been joined in the public mind.

Art and politics, "Klinghoffer"-style

The Death of Klinghoffer, the Peter Sellars-John Adams-Alice Goodman-Mark Morris

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

operatic collaboration about the killing of a wheelchair-bound American Jew by Arab terrorists during the 1985 *Achille Lauro* hijacking, has just been shown several times at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It is now on its way to audiences in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Here in the New York Metropolitan Area, the production was a resounding dud, lukewarmly received by audiences and excoriated in the press. In itself the press reaction was interesting, for the opera was rejected not just by Edward Rothstein, the new music critic of *The New York Times*, but by writers in the yuppie-conscious purlieus of *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Observer*, and *New York* magazine. Each writer hated some aspects of *Klinghoffer* more than others, but by the time the press was through, every part of the opera—production, music, libretto, and choreography—had been described, and found wanting.

What lay at the heart of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, of course, was not the postmodern, minimalist art for which the collaborators are known, but the politics which brought the opera into being in the first place. The subject of the work was not the murder of a cripple by young thugs, but the state of Arab-Jewish relations in the Middle East, and, by extension, in the United States as well. Leon Klinghoffer was an innocent American Jewish tourist who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time; he was killed by Arabs bent on revenging the wrongs done their people. The opera was evenhanded in the sense that Arabs and Jews received roughly equal time; it was hardly evenhanded in the way the Arabs spent their time talking about the destruction of their homes by the Israelis, and the Jews spent theirs talking about the souvenirs they bought on their trips and, in the case of Klinghoffer's widow, about bodily aches and pains.

The artistic verdict on *Klinghoffer* was clear; what is not so clear is just why an opera of such minimal aesthetic qualifications should have been quite so eagerly awaited by opera lovers and followers of the contemporary avant-garde. Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the fact that those responsible for *Klinghoffer* thought that by pushing all the right politically correct buttons about the Middle East, consumerism, and American hegemony, their art could hardly fail. On this reasoning, politics (as Henry Kissinger once said about power in its relation to sex) could be the greatest aphrodisiac for art. With such a subject, treated in such a way, who could fail to make a significant opera?

There is no doubt that opera today is in trouble, and that viable new works would find a warm welcome. But opera is art, not politics, and a failed music, allied to a failed production, a failed libretto, and a failed choreography, can take no wings from a politically correct ideology. And so in the end, all the separate artistic failures of *Klinghoffer*, despite the glamour of their political provenance, made for a total failure. We have always known that art cannot validate politics; the lesson of this latest attempt at making it big in contemporary opera is that politics cannot validate art. Art, like sex, is doubtless better without aphrodisiacs.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

An Orwell for the Nineties?

by Hilton Kramer

A modern literary intellectual lives and writes in constant dread—not, indeed, of public opinion in the wider sense, but of public opinion within his own group. As a rule, luckily, there is more than one group, but also at any given moment there is a dominant orthodoxy, to offend against which needs a thick skin and sometimes means cutting one's income in half for years on end. Obviously, for about fifteen years past, the dominant orthodoxy, especially among the young, has been "left."
—George Orwell, "Writers and Leviathan," 1948

It was inevitable, I suppose, that the collapse of Communism and the waning of the Cold War would sooner or later bring in their wake a revaluation of the writers most explicitly identified with the anti-Communist cause. It is not to be expected, however, that this process of revaluation will redound to the favor of the writers in question. History may have proved them to have been right about Communism and the Soviet system all along, but it is precisely their having been right—right, it will no doubt be said, for the wrong reasons—that will be held against them. In this country, anyway, the imperatives of cultural life remain as unforgiving as ever about assaults on Left-liberal orthodoxy, which is as dominant today—in the academy, in the media, and in literature and the arts—as it was in George Orwell's day. The truth is, smart literary opinion has always looked with disfavor on the forthright expression of anti-Communist views, and never hesitated to castigate even the mightiest figures for going "too far" in their critique of the Communist system. Somehow, despite all the acknowledged enormities—never mind the unacknowledged ones—the system had to be absolved and the facts mitigated in the name of an unquestioned ideal.

One recalls now with a certain interest, for example, George Steiner's blistering attack on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for daring to remind us that it was Lenin, rather than Stalin or Hitler, who created the model for the most hateful of modern political institutions—the slave-labor camp—and that the dimensions of the Soviet terror were no less horrific than those of the Nazi era. "To infer that the Soviet terror is as hideous as Hitlerism," Mr. Steiner wrote in his review of *The Gulag Archipelago* in *The New Yorker* of August 5, 1974, "is not only a brutal oversimplification but a moral indecency." I daresay that Mr. Steiner's sense of moral indecency, or at least his expression of it, has probably been modified by recent events in Russia and Eastern Europe. The noise of all those Lenin monuments being toppled must have reached even his reclusive ears. Yet it is important to recall attacks of this kind, which always had less to do with the realities of Communism and the Soviet system than with the need to uphold the pieties of Left-liberal orthodoxy, if we are to understand the assaults still to come on the writers who insisted on telling the truth about the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

longest reigning tyranny of the twentieth century.

In the case of George Orwell, the attempt to soften, re-interpret, and otherwise misrepresent his criticism of Communism and the Soviet system was already well established long before there was any clear sign that the collapse of Communism was imminent in the Soviet Union. It was given a renewed impetus by the Vietnam War that brought us, among much else, Mary McCarthy's furious attack on Orwell in *The New York Review of Books.*[1] Again, this had less to do with the realities of Communism—in either the Soviet Union or Vietnam—than with the need to defend the Left-liberal position on the war, which was pro-Communist and anti-American. What made Mary McCarthy's attempted demolition of Orwell's reputation especially significant at the time, of course, was that it came from a writer whose own reputation had been made in the anti-Communist left-wing milieu of *Partisan Review*, where Orwell had been a revered figure. It thus marked a new willingness, which was then widespread on the liberal Left, to disavow the criticism of Communism in the name of an anti-war movement that identified Washington, rather than Moscow or Hanoi, as the primary enemy of peace and democracy. Mary McCarthy understood very well what Orwell would have made of her pusillanimous apologia for the Communist system in Hanoi, not to mention her accompanying vilification of the United States, and so the whole edifice of his anti-Communist critique—which included a devastating description of the kind of fellow-traveler she had now become—had to be discredited if her own sense of superior virtue and that of the anti-war movement were to be sustained.

This assault on Orwell's anti-Communist views reached a new climax in 1984 with the debate over the meaning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There was, for example, the Signet edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that, in both Walter Cronkite's introduction and Erich Fromm's afterword, attempted to deflect the book's criticism of Communism in Russia and make it seem as if those political strictures were actually directed against a society like our own. As Robert Conquest wrote in a splendid essay at the time,

> to apply Orwell's highly specific totalitarian terror-falsification concepts to assorted Western notions is to dilute, indeed to stultify, Orwell's point. . . . Above all, this sort of thing distorts Orwell's view of the totalist terror state as something distinct and different from our own imperfect societies—indeed, something to be resisted at all costs.

Mr. Conquest's analysis of this point is worth looking at in some detail, for it is quite the best response we have seen to this shameless attempt to turn *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into a political allegory of Western capitalist society.

> The foundation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [Mr. Conquest wrote] is, in fact, Stalin's Russia. In his *George Orwell*, Raymond Williams (writing from a leftwing viewpoint) criticizes him for this. Williams rightly argues that he could have gone beyond "a single political tendency" and sought models all over; and in effect censures him for *not* seeing a potential totalitarianism in the Western system.
>
> Had Orwell indeed thought that the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* regime could have arisen from the corruption of conservatives, capitalists, Labourites, or whatever, he had a particularly good opportunity of developing it—with a neo-capitalist-conservative totalitarianism in Oceania to balance "neo-Bolshevism" in Eurasia. He did nothing of the kind, and those who argue that every political culture, with its imperfect politicians, insensitive bureaucrats, occasional abuses of power, sporadic euphemisms and falsifications, is seen by Orwell as equally liable to breed totalitarianism, are simply not reading the book (or, come to that, Orwell's other explicatory writings of the same period).

1 See the title essay of Mary McCarthy's *The Writing on the Wall* (Harcourt Brace & World, 1970).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> He did not do so, because he did not in fact see the West as seriously tending in that direction. Much as he detested Conservatives and Catholics, press lords and movie moguls, he did not envisage them as precursors of the terror state. And he saw Western culture, on which they were the warts, as nevertheless the hope of the world. . . . The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was his model of a frightful local present and a possible frightful world future.[2]

It speaks volumes, of course, about the compulsion of the orthodox Left to blunt and distort Orwell's criticism of Communism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that this fundamental truth about his work should even need to be defended in this way.

Now, with the publication of Michael Shelden's *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*, we may well be entering a new phase in the history of Orwell's reputation, for there is much about this book to suggest that this is the way Orwell is likely to be perceived by liberal opinion in the future.[3] Indeed, it is almost enough to make one believe in the impersonal imperatives of the *Zeitgeist* that such a benign, politically defanged portrait of Orwell should make its appearance at the very moment when we are embarking upon the first years of the post-Communist, post-Cold War era.

As readers of his excellent earlier book —*Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of "Horizon"* (1989)—will already know, Mr. Shelden does not write from any very specific political position. He is, I suppose, a sort of liberal with no very pronounced ideological convictions about any of the issues that were so central to Orwell's life and work. Because of this political detachment, his biography was bound to be a vast improvement on Bernard Crick's *George Orwell: A Life* (1980), and it is. Mr. Crick's *Life*, which was foolishly authorized by Orwell's widow (who subsequently, to her credit, repudiated it), was clearly animated by a determination to undercut Orwell's political vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and many of his other writings. (In the final chapter of the book, the politics of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are characterized by Mr. Crick as "at best incautious, at worst foolish.") In other words, Mr. Crick was writing from the stronghold of the "dominant orthodoxy" that Orwell had spent much of his mature life vigorously opposing.

Mr. Shelden's approach is very different, much more in the vein of conventional literary biography. He has turned up a good many letters heretofore unknown and tracked down old friends of Orwell's—including old girlfriends—who were never before interviewed. On at least one subject—Saint Cyprian's, the boarding school where Orwell spent much of his boyhood and which he wrote about in "Such, Such Were the Joys" (1947)—Mr. Shelden's account is so exhaustive that it leaves one hoping that we shall never have to read about it ever again. Most absorbing of all as sheer biographical narrative is the story of Orwell's last years on the remote Scottish island of Jura—a story which, if Orwell had been able to write it, would have made a better novel than most of the conventional novels he wrote.

Yet, as fine as much of Mr. Shelden's book is, it leaves one doubting that biography is finally the most effective means of getting at Orwell's importance as a writer. For the net effect of this book is to shift attention away from Orwell's intense absorption in the politics of totalitarianism and make politics itself seem, if not exactly marginal to Orwell's interests, then at least subordinate to the personal and literary concerns that are Mr. Shelden's own primary interest. This does not so much ignore Orwell's political philosophy as render it vaguely innocuous, overly personal, and possibly even eccentric—more a matter of the

---

2 Quoted from "Orwell: *1984*," in *Tyrants and Typewriters: Communiqués from the Struggle for Truth*, by Robert Conquest (Lexington Books, 1989).

3 *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*, by Michael Shelden; HarperCollins, 497 pages, $25.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man's psychology than of the writer's moral vision. As a result, what might be called the crank element in Orwell, which is certainly not to be denied in any complete account of his life and work, is constantly underscored while his abiding political preoccupations are made to seem more the attribute of an odd personality than the single most significant aspect of his life's work.

This is not to say that Mr. Shelden in any way neglects the details of Orwell's intense involvement in political questions. His account of the writing of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) is excellent, and so is his summary of the ambivalent attitude toward socialism that went into the writing of that book.

> Like everything else in his book, Orwell's approach to socialism is individualistic [he writes]. He wants to be part of a collective effort, but he also wants to be free to speak his mind, to disagree with colleagues, to read what he wants, to go where he wants to go. He does not want to be a statistic in someone else's master plan. He advocates a classless society, yet he fears losing his own distinct identity as a son of the middle class. . . . Almost all his doubts about established socialist thinking are related to what he perceived to be its tendency to encourage conformity and its preoccupation with centralized planning.

It was precisely this attitude that won for Orwell a reputation as what he himself called "a right-wing deviationist" among the stalwarts of the orthodox Left, and this in turn caused him immense trouble when it came to getting his work published.

About the difficulties that Orwell faced in dealing with editors and publishers in thrall to the pieties of the Left, both in the late Thirties and well into the Forties, Mr. Shelden also gives us a detailed account. The story that he tells about the writing and publication of *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell's account of his experience in the Spanish Civil War, is one of the best things in the book. It is startling to discover that at least one reviewer—Desmond Flower writing in *The Observer*—declared that "Mr. Orwell is a great writer" on the basis of *Homage to Catalonia*, but otherwise the fate of this book was appalling. It sold scarcely seven hundred copies, and did not find a publisher in the United States until 1952, by which time, of course, Orwell was a best-selling author the world over because of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Mr. Shelden is too honest a writer to neglect either Orwell's political involvements or his ambivalent attitudes toward socialism and orthodoxies of the Left. It is what he makes of them in this book, especially when it comes to the writing of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that raises doubts about his critical understanding of Orwell's most important work and about the ability of a liberal biographer to do justice to the substance of Orwell's achievement. There are times, indeed, when Mr. Shelden is so intent upon "saving" Orwell from his Cold War reputation that he significantly distorts the meaning of his work.

About *Animal Farm* (1945), for example, he writes as follows:

> As a clever satire on Stalin's betrayal of the Russian Revolution, *Animal Farm* caught the popular imagination just when the Cold War was beginning to make itself felt. For many years "anticommunists" enjoyed using it as a propaganda weapon in that war, but this was a gross misrepresentation of the book and a violation of the spirit in which Orwell wrote it. He was not a fanatical opponent of the Soviet Union. Indeed, given the fact that Stalin's agents had almost managed to imprison him in Spain, his view of the Soviet system was most enlightened.

From the use of the word "clever" to the placing of "anticommunists" in quotation marks to the astounding assertion that Orwell was not a "fanatical opponent of the Soviet Union"—was he then an *un*fanatical opponent?—to the notion that it was "most enlightened" to take a more benign view of the Soviet system, this entire passage is a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

complete betrayal of what Orwell achieved in *Animal Farm* and what he stood for as a writer. Orwell may still have harbored the wish—or rather, the illusion—that "the existence of democratic Socialism in the West [might] exert a regenerative influence upon Russia," as he wrote to Dwight Macdonald at the time, but there can be no question that he was a staunch anti-Communist when he wrote *Animal Farm*, and remained so for the few remaining years of his life.

And when he comes to writing about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Mr. Shelden takes refuge from the book's politics in what can only be called the fallacy of biographical reduction.

> It is Orwell's most compelling work, and its enormous success over the years is well deserved, but it is also his most misunderstood work. Endless theories have been put forward to explain its vision of the future, but not many critics have been willing to see how firmly rooted it is in Orwell's past. Almost every aspect of Orwell's life is in some way represented in the book. Winston Smith's yearning for the green wilderness of the "Golden Country" is very much connected to Orwell's long-standing affection for the lost Edwardian world of his childhood in Henley.

And so on. We are hardly surprised to find Mr. Shelden assuring us that "Orwell's experience of bullying at St. Cyprian's cannot be discounted as an influence on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*." It is in passages like this that one comes to despair of the entire genre of literary biography.

Consider, as a contrast—the contrast between literary fallacy and political reality—the following passage from a more recent essay by Robert Conquest. It appears in a review of a new biography of Lenin.

> Many in the West had become accustomed to the existence of the Soviet Union, treating it as though it were a normal component of the world scene . . . while in fact it was a ghastly aberration, which distorted history for most of our century. In Russia, one quite often hears the complaint, "How is it that Orwell understood our system, and so many Soviet experts in the West did not?" The answer is that for Westerners a considerable effort of the imagination was needed to understand an essentially alien political movement and the correspondingly alien political and social order it created. Orwell had the imagination; the experts did not. And, in many cases, still do not.[4]

Mr. Shelden doesn't, either. Hence his eagerness to save Orwell from what he clearly regards as the embarrassment of his Cold War reputation.

Orwell was always a complicated figure for the Left to deal with. He remained an avowed socialist to the end of his life, yet he was not the kind of socialist the orthodox Left could accommodate. Though in no sense a conservative, he *was* something of a "right-wing deviationist" when it came to Communism and the Soviet system. He may have hated capitalism, but it was Communist totalitarianism that he made the target of his most ambitious writings. This was the hard truth that the Left found so difficult to swallow, and still finds difficult to swallow. When it could no longer prevent Orwell from winning a wide readership, it commenced to re-interpret the meaning of his work in order to blunt its effect. The saddest thing about Michael Shelden's *Orwell* is that, despite its many fine details, it belongs in the end to this campaign to misrepresent the nature of Orwell's achievement. It reminds us that the vaunted political "center" that academic liberalism sometimes claims for itself—and to which Mr. Shelden can, I think, be said to belong—remains tethered to the agenda of the orthodox Left that Orwell so much despised. This Orwell for the Nineties is, in other words, very like the Orwell that the Left has been insisting on since the heyday of Stalinism in the Thirties—an ideological fiction.

---

4 "From the Underworld: The Will to Power and the Socialist Order," by Robert Conquest, in *The Times Literary Supplement* of September 20, 1991.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New light on Corot

by Karen Wilkin

Those cultural dinosaurs among us who persist in believing that paintings and sculptures have something to offer other than politics, sociology, anthropology, or even sex, tend to be skeptical about revisionist enterprises. Nothing is more exciting than having one's old habits of thought jolted loose by new observations and new information, but, all too often, self-proclaimed new approaches turn out to be predictable attempts to redeem the reputations of second- or third-rate figures, "marginalized," we are told, because of race, sex, country of origin, class, and all the rest of it. (How come plain old lack of ability is never an issue in these discussions?) Whole periods, entire movements in the history of art have been re-examined in light of these currently fashionable pieties, but, alas, they don't usually offer anything more illuminating than the entrenched ideas they aim to replace.

So imagine my surprise and pleasure when two patently revisionist undertakings, the recent exhibition "The Rise of Landscape Painting in France: Corot to Monet," organized by Kermit S. Champa,[1] and the new book *Corot in Italy*, by Peter Galassi,[2] both proved astonishingly fresh, perceptive, and downright enlightening. Given the visual evidence of Champa's exhibition and the painstakingly accumulated, persuasively argued evidence of Galassi's book, our view of nineteenth-century French painting may never be the same. What is perhaps most refreshing is that this genuine "re-vision" results from a thoughtful, intelligent consideration of the paintings themselves in their historical context, not from stretching the subject on the Procrustean bed of modish theory. That it is necessary to say this is a sorry comment on the state of so much contemporary criticism, in which the actual work of art is reduced to the status of illustration for a *parti pris* and regarded as less important than the theory it is made to serve. ("Work of art," of course, is a tainted phrase; "cultural production" is the proper term.) I was recently on a panel where one of my colleagues, a critic much in demand, unabashedly spoke of publishing an enthusiastic article about the meaning of a Jenny Holzer work. "But," he said, "I must admit I was disappointed *when I finally saw the actual piece.*" Italics mine.

1 "The Rise of Landscape Painting in France: Corot to Monet" was on view at the IBM Gallery of Science and Art, New York, from July 30 through September 28, 1991, after opening at the Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire (January 29-April 28). The show will travel to the Dallas Museum of Art (November 10-January 5, 1992) and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (January 28-March 29). A catalogue, edited and with an essay by Kermit S. Champa, Professor of Art History at Brown University, has been published by the Currier Gallery/Harry N. Abrams (231 pages, $39.95; $29.95 paper).

2 *Corot in Italy: Open-Air Painting and the Classical-Landscape Tradition*, by Peter Galassi; Yale University Press, 258 pages, $55.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The exhibition "Corot to Manet" suffered from no such misconceptions but made viewers look hard and reflect on what they had seen. (The catalogue, a very peculiar document, is another story, but more about that later.) The show made us reconsider what we knew of nineteenth-century French landscape painting by bringing together a marvelous selection of works by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875) and setting them in the context of paintings by his fellows, the group of younger painters loosely (if not always accurately) known as the Barbizon School—Théodore Rousseau, Narcisse Diaz de la Peña, Charles-François Daubigny, and Constant Troyon, among others. What they had in common was a conviction that the ordinary agricultural landscape of the Île de France was as interesting and as worthy a subject for painting as the Roman Campagna or the Bay of Naples celebrated by their Neoclassicist predecessors. Figure paintings of peasants at work by Van Gogh's hero Jean-François Millet enlarged our sense of this generation's aims, while works by less familiar, slightly peripheral artists, including a sheep-painter of amazing single-mindedness, suggested the depth of this vernacular landscape tradition. Vigorous landscapes—and one inexplicable self-portrait—declared the idiosyncratic presence of Gustave Courbet as an alternative to the pastoral serenity of Corot and the Barbizon painters, and a few perfectly stunning Claude Monets and Alfred Sisleys, along with a quirky, tantalizing Frédéric Bazille seascape, announced the debut of a new generation.

Individually, the Corots, Courbets, and early Monets were justification enough for the show. Even the usually tame Rousseau and Daubigny looked good, and rather more adventurous than expected. More important, the show filled in gaps by reminding us of the seamlessness of the French art world in the first part of the nineteenth century. It offered confrontations between works of near contemporaries, fully aware of one another's work, and allowed us to make comparisons that might have been common in the nineteenth century, when the paintings of Corot, his contemporaries, and the artists who challenged them would all have been seen in close proximity. As a result, the show made us see the Impressionists, whose early work concluded the exhibition, in a new relationship to the landscape painters who preceded them. In the context of "Corot to Monet," the Impressionists' choice of suburban Paris as a landscape motif, complete with its burgeoning factories and warehouses, seemed as much an inevitable extension of the Barbizon painters' substitution of the Forest of Fontainebleau for the Castelli Romani as a declaration of modernism.

It's hard for us, at the end of the twentieth century, to imagine how surprising these even-tempered landscapes must have appeared when they they were first exhibited. Their informality was disturbing to a public that revered Nicholas Poussin's and Claude Lorrain's carefully constructed views of an idealized Italian landscape, punctuated with Roman ruins and high-minded references to history and myth. Critics seeking uplifting motifs in the paintings exhibited at the annual Salons found the Barbizon works a little disturbing, too, and in the politically volatile France of the period, these now seemingly innocuous scenes of rural life and peasant labor were seen as subversive comments on current conditions.

It's even more difficult for present-day viewers to remember that landscape painting itself was slightly subversive or, at least, somewhat questionable. The most serious, gifted students at the official academies didn't become landscape painters. That was for those who weren't good enough. In the late eighteenth century, when Sir Joshua Reynolds addressed his charges at the British Academy, he outlined a hierarchy of subject matter: history painting was the most noble and challenging endeavor, followed by portraiture (assuming one concentrated on the most outstanding, noble figures of one's time), followed by genre painting (scenes from contemporary life); at the bottom of the list, for those who weren't up to to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

demands of history, portrait, or genre, there was still life and landscape. A French academician, a contemporary of Reynolds's, wrote a letter expressing his hope that among the students at the Academy "there might be found someone who, not possessing all necessary to achieve distinction in history painting, would take up the genre of landscape." By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a hierarchy had been established within the tradition of landscape painting itself. The "historical or heroic" landscape, exemplified by Poussin or the Carracci, was the most distinguished approach, while Claude Lorrain, though admired, was perceived as belonging to "a second class, of a style less severe than those of the first." In the third class were landscapes in the manner of Flemish or Dutch painters such as Ruisdael. Part of the modernist enterprise, we all have been taught, was to make such categories irrelevant.

Champa's exhibition announced Corot as the first modernist landscape painter, but only partly because his paintings resist traditional academic classification. Corot was not radically modern in his choice of subject matter, nor did he declare himself forcefully as an individual personality in his work. Rather, Champa points out in his catalogue, Corot is set apart by his characteristic, nonimitative touch and by his way of conceiving a picture as an inflected expanse. Champa describes this as "the alternation of the accented and unaccented stresses of pictorial technique—in tone and in touch, and in the softly elaborate, precisely choreographed dance of topographic and figural specifics within a given picture." For Champa, Corot clearly sets a standard for French landscape painting of the period. Just how remarkable a painter Corot could be was made clear by the exhibition's selection of his works, from the intimate to the public, from recollections of his Italian years to silvery gray-green evocations of the moist light of Ville d'Avray. The spectrum of tones, of kinds of green, of qualities of light, and of paint surface visible in this fine group of paintings should have set at rest, once and for all, the notion that all late Corots look alike—all gray and dull green, with water, a screen of trees, and a single dot of red somewhere, for accent. *The Pond and the Cabassud House at Ville d'Avray* (*c.* 1855-60, Des Moines Art Center) was enough to support the most radical claims for Corot as modernist: a wide band of cloud-flecked sky, a block of shiny pond, a slice of road, all anchored by a frontal, declarative wall of buildings to the left, and all of this slammed into place by a group of trees almost dead center, trunks reaching from bottom to top, foliage obscuring the middle of the picture, shifting attention to the edges. As if this weren't enough, the way those trees are painted makes us forcibly aware of the surface of the canvas, of the artifice of painting.

Corot's individuality was further accented, in the installation at the IBM Gallery, by an introductory section that included a group of works by John Constable, who attracted enormous attention and even won a gold medal when, at the Salon of 1824, he exhibited *The Hay Wain* and a large view of Salisbury Cathedral. The Constables in Champa's show, while not the Salon submissions, were splendid, but quite apart from the pleasures of the paintings themselves, they helped to remind us of what painters in Paris were responding to in the early nineteenth century. Clearly, Constable offered French painters of the period an alternative to the "historical and heroic" tradition they had inherited from Poussin and Claude, but his influence seems to have been oddly limited. Constable's vernacular subject matter must have struck a sympathetic chord in the Barbizon generation, but, in general, they resisted his distinctive way of painting, his rough stroking and flickering light. As Champa points out, most of them mistrusted Constable's emphasis on facture, seeing it not as a carrier of emotion or "poetic feeling" but solely as an end in itself. Among the Barbizon painters represented in any depth in the exhibition, only Diaz appeared to be responding overtly to Constable's vigorous technique, and in Diaz's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hands it became pure manner. Yet, curiously, the presence of Constable's work in the exhibition suggested greater affinities between his approach and that of the Barbizon School than between the French painters and Corot. Corot's atmospheric, slightly remote, but tender landscapes seemed wholly his own and noticeably unlike the sturdy, if stylized, naturalism of Constable and his own younger compatriots.

If Corot was the star of the first part of Champa's show, Courbet (1819-1877) dominated the second part. The sheer forcefulness, the pig-headed aggressiveness of even the most suavely painted of Courbet's landscapes made the Barbizon painters look positively academic and a little *lame*, as undergraduate usage has it. The Courbets leaped at us, their ham-fisted intensity making plain why the artist kept getting refused by Salon juries, year after year, and making plain, too, why modern-day viewers find him so rich. The Albright-Knox's *Source of the Loue* (*c.* 1864), with its dead-center "black hole" and its robust rock face, looked as astounding in the midst of other Courbets as it does in isolation in Buffalo, while the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts's *Fox in the Snow* (1860) was as unexpected and seductive, with its startling viewpoint and its sensuously painted fur, as it was in the Brooklyn Museum's "Courbet Rediscovered" exhibition a few years ago.

Courbet, while a full generation younger than Corot, outlived him by only two years; their careers overlapped by a good three decades. Yet Courbet's muscular landscapes and seascapes, with their outcropping of thickly painted rock, their crusty waves, and their slightly clunky compositions seemed light years away from the delicate foliage, shimmering water, and loose geometric structure of Corot's Ville d'Avray canvases. Daubigny, Diaz, and Rousseau provided a bridge between the two. Like Courbet's, the Barbizon painters' subjects were earthy, but they rendered them, as did Corot, with elegance and lyricism. In general, Diaz was gutsier than the others, which is not to say better; his agitated paint handling, reminiscent, as I've said, of Constable's, was usually made subservient to a compositional formula: convoluted pale tree trunks, a sunlit glade, a gloomy surround of dark trees. The persistence of this conception was underscored by the exhibition's *Stag Hunt* (1846, Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Indiana), where plunging hounds take the place of writhing tree trunks. Everything else is the same. There's something perpetually autumnal about Diaz's light, in contrast with the milky springtime light of Corot or the naturalistic variables of his fellow Barbizon painters.

Champa's selection of Daubignys was a surprise. I admit that I haven't paid that much attention to him, but I can't recall his looking as strong as he did in this context. The paintings were bolder, more straightforward, and less conventional than I expected and suggested a relationship to Courbet that I hadn't been aware of earlier. Some paintings, especially a large view of women in a poppy-dotted field, made a case for Daubigny as a kind of proto-Impressionist, although the dates of these pictures—from the mid-1870s—suggest that the influence went the other way. Rousseau, too, emerged as a painter of some substance, with a surprising experimental streak. The works ranged from the generous and plausible to the finicky and over-finished, but, like Daubigny, he looked better to me than usual in this context.

Yet even at their best, all of the Barbizon painters seemed a little self-conscious and rather plodding. None of them ever achieved the apparent effortlessness or the magical sense of atmosphere of Corot, still less the omnipresent sense of the individual of Courbet. There are sound aesthetic reasons why we pay more attention to Corot and Courbet than to Daubigny and Diaz. It isn't the result of a conspiracy. Corot's and Courbet's paintings are simply more eloquent, more expressive, *better* than most of their colleagues'. It is to Champa's credit that his selections and the weighting of the exhibition acknowledged that. He let the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

paintings speak for themselves, but he didn't shrink from making value judgments, a rare thing in these all-inclusive times.

The last section of "Corot to Monet," which included not only early Impressionist works but those of their immediate ancestors, took on new meaning in the context of what preceded it. Compared to the Barbizon landscapes, Eugène Boudin's sparkling beach scenes and Johan Jongkind's cool riverbank views looked declaratively modern, more closely related to the concerns of the succeeding generation—who included Boudin's pupil Claude Monet—than that of their real contemporaries. A Courbet of about 1869, *A Bay with Cliffs* (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut), pointed ahead to the mature Monet and looked far more "advanced" than a listless, patchy Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

Among the Monets, two crisp chalky canvases, *The Seine at Bougival* (1869, Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire) and *Village Street* (1869-71, private collection), were dazzling. As windblown and light-struck as the Metropolitan Museum of Art's delicious *Terrace at Sainte-Adresse*, they read, in this setting, as re-inventions of Corot's themes, profoundly informed by the particulars of the small towns of the Île de France, by the scudding clouds and cool northern light of the region. But Monet presents these quintessentially French images not, as Corot would have, with a self-effacing orchestration of subtle tones and close-valued hues, laid down in a delicate interweaving of strokes, but with broad patches of relatively unmodulated color that assert the presence of an unignorable individual as much as they evoke strong light and clear air.

Oddly, the catalogue of this intelligently selected, beautifully presented, *rational* exhibition seems to spring from a totally different set of assumptions than those manifest in the show. The reproductions are good, the organization fairly lucid, and the essays on the influence of photography and the Japanese print, by Deborah Johnson, and on the period in general, by Fronia E. Wissman, are pretty straightforward and informative, if unremarkable. The curator's own contributions are something quite other. Briefly, Champa's thesis equates the entire development of landscape painting in nineteenth-century France with the painters' intense response to music, especially the music of Beethoven and, a little later, Wagner. In fairness to Champa, he does say that he expects people to find the notion "eccentric," and it's not *wholly* speculation. Beethoven was news in Paris at the time; his music, only recently introduced to France —and championed by Berlioz—was controversial and widely discussed. The public performances where Beethoven's music was heard were themselves a new phenomenon, like the music played at them, and their impact on an audience accustomed, at best, to amateur performances of chamber works, at home, must have been extraordinary. Deluged as we are with recorded sound, we can't imagine the experience of what Champa calls "the nineteenth-century ear" hearing Beethoven's symphonies for the first time. Just what the reaction of the painters under discussion might have been, however, seems open to question.

Champa's comparison of landscape painting and music in his catalogue essay, his methodological notes, and his catalogue entries takes the form of an extended metaphor, punctuated by assumptions only partially supported by snippets of fact—what is known, say, about Corot's taste in music and listening habits. Champa claims that most nineteenth-century French landscape painters were "melomanes"—obsessive lovers of classical music—hence much of nineteenth-century French landscape painting is a conscious attempt to translate nature into images conceived like musical compositions—in terms of color, rhythm, accent, harmony, and all the rest of it—rather than in terms of naturalistic depiction. It's certainly an original approach, but it might have been more persuasive if it had been more of a throwaway. As it is, Champa harps on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

idea (sorry, it slipped out) and reaches for musical analogies to the point where they seem forced rather than convincing. Speaking of Corot's paintings of the mid-1850s, for example, he says: "In them he develops and deploys a visual language based—like dramatic music's audible language—on rhythms, harmonies, contrasts of accent, graphic-colorist counterpoint, and ultimately on cadence."

Champa has a good eye—the show's selection is ample evidence of this—and his observations are often penetrating. There are extremely insightful comments throughout the text, about touch, about physicality, about composition, and about the character of particular works, the kind of insights, I may add, that I expect of Champa, who has a fine track record. The music issue tends to overwhelm much of what I found most interesting in the text, but Champa's repetitious and rather jargon-filled prose doesn't help, either. He keeps using "imaging" and "imaging maneuver" to mean how a painter concentrates on particular aspects of subject and "foregrounded" to mean "emphasized" or "stressed." Convolution and ponderousness abound. (Has *everyone* taken Lacan's assertion that he prefers "the entry into the text" to be "difficult" absolutely literally?) In a passage comparing Courbet with Corot and Delacroix, Champa asserts:

> Ideological similarities of expressive and constructive practice increasingly outweigh difference in the nominal subject origins of such practices. In the emerging consensus of aesthetic opinion regarding the self-sufficiency of technique, the musical model for painting metamorphoses from one of recognized emulation to one of essence. Musicality has become intrinsic to significant pictorial practice to the degree that ideological functioning need no longer even be recognized verbally.

Fortunately, the visual impact of "Corot to Monet" could not be weakened by even the most elaborate of Champa's arguments. His selection of paintings was so sensitive that it made the rather daunting text a little beside the point. The fascinating new book by Peter Galassi, coincidentally, makes a wonderful accompaniment to the exhibition, perhaps even better than its own catalogue. *Corot in Italy* ostensibly focuses on the painter's years in Italy, particularly his first extended sojourn in Rome and the surrounding countryside, but it can serve as a first-rate, provocative guide to nineteenth-century French landscape painting in general. Galassi, the newly appointed director of the photography department at MOMA, sees Corot neither as the first modernist nor as a precursor to Impressionism but as an heir to the great "historical or heroic" tradition of Poussin and Claude, whose originality lay not in rejecting the past but in fusing the directness of working from nature with the formality, discipline, and high ideals of Neoclassical landscape painting.

Twentieth-century art historians have often praised Corot's firm, warmly colored *plein-air* studies of the Italian landscape for their freshness and their disregard of established conventions, disparaging, at the same time, the highly finished large-scale Salon paintings that he derived from his open-air sketches in the studio. The outdoor studies are seen as radical rejections of a traditional approach to landscape and hailed as prefigurations of Impressionist practice, while the Salon paintings are seen as timid and regressive. Galassi, however, maintains that Corot's "essential achievement lies not in [his] outdoor work taken alone, but in the originality and resourcefulness with which [he] engaged a new dialogue between the studio and the field." In Galassi's view, the perception of Corot as a rebel, rather than as a painter who saw himself as profoundly connected with the art of the past, also distorts our view of the evolution of modernism. "The key to French tradition is precisely that outdoor painting was not isolated from the grand ideals of the studio. Impressionism is inaccurately described as a triumph of outdoor painting over studio routine, of empiricism over stale convention. Rather the triumph consisted in investing the fresh opportunity of open-air work

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with the venerable ambitions of the studio."

Galassi presents a wealth of documentary evidence, images, and information about Corot's predecessors and contemporaries that reveals the vigor of the Neoclassical landscape tradition well into the nineteenth century in France and situates Corot as its culmination. Galassi demonstrates convincingly that Corot's Italian studies, fine and fresh as they are, were conceived as part of normal academic practice. Study in Rome of classical antiquities and the landscape that cradled them was a crucial part of the education of any serious French painter when Corot arrived in Italy in 1825. Art and nature alike were part of the course of study. Just as particular statues, elevated to archetypal status, were to be examined, drawn, and absorbed as models for future figure paintings, particular views of classical ruins and of places sanctified by mythology, literature, and history were to be studied with equal care, again for later use in the studio. Far from representing a break with tradition, Corot's Italian studies are evidence of his continued respect for traditional practice.

Corot's individuality manifested itself fully after his return to France, Galassi shows us, when he began to impose the formality of studio composition on his painting from nature and to filter the landscape of the Île de France through his memories of Italian classicism, eventually turning the opalescent light of Northern France into something as palpable and visually dense as the strong, form-revealing sunshine of the Campagna. (When he returned to Italy, for his third visit, in the 1840s, he did the reverse, imposing the silvery atmosphere of the north on his studies of Tivoli.) What Galassi also makes clear is the difference between Corot and the younger painters, such as Daubigny and Rousseau, who followed in his path. Too young to have been shaped by the persistence of the Neoclassical tradition, their approach to painting from nature was more casual, less idealized, and less firmly structured than Corot's.

Corot in Italy is plentifully and beautifully illustrated, with many near-life-sized details that make Corot's firm touch as evident as reproductions can. A delight to look at, *Corot in Italy* is also a delight to read—lucid, intelligent, and blissfully free of jargon. Galassi has a gift for the telling phrase and—a scarce commodity these days—clear-headed discussion. "Corot to Monet" was one of the best, most absorbing exhibitions of the past season. *Corot in Italy* is one of the best, most absorbing new books on art I've come across in a long time.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Lincoln Kirstein *by Hilton Kramer*
Music as a vocation *by Samuel Lipman*
On "The Columbia History of the American Novel" *by Bruce Bawer*
The Sainsbury Wing of London's National Gallery *by Roger Kimball*
"Dislocations" at MOMA *by Jed Perl*
The New York of Dawn Powell *by Lauren Weiner*
Jacques Copeau *by Frederick Brown*
Calder at the Whitney *by Karen Wilkin*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Race and art: the career of James Baldwin

by Bruce Bawer

Hey Jimmy:
Ain't you heard?
RACE and ART
Are far apart.
—postcard from Langston Hughes to James Baldwin, 1962

By the time of his death in 1987, James Baldwin had long since become that most tragic of literary figures: a major writer on the skids whose last few published books, painful in their lack of distinction, served only to remind discriminating readers of how far he had plummeted since his glory days. And glory days they had truly been: in the late Fifties and early Sixties he was not only one of America's most critically acclaimed authors, but, in the words of James Campbell—who has now published the first full biography of Baldwin—"practically the most famous writer in the land."[1] In later years, however, he spent less time writing, it seemed, than sitting in Paris cafés, giving interviews in which he spun out fraudulent, self-flattering versions of his personal history as well as glibly radical pronouncements upon American society and race relations. Indeed, as Campbell notes, Baldwin's genre of choice during his later years was not the novel, play, poem, essay, or short story—at all of which he had tried his hand—but the interview; and the more absurdly extremist his remarks, the more sorrowfully aware his sometime admirers were of how much distance he had placed not only between himself and the literary interests of his youth, but between himself and the philosophy of race that he had communicated so eloquently in much of his early work.

It means nothing simply to know that an artist is black; it can be important, however, to know what being black means to him, to know the ideas about race on which he was raised. As anyone knows who has read "Notes of a Native Son"—one of the handful of autobiographical essays that form perhaps his most enduring achievement—Baldwin, born in Harlem in 1924, grew up in an atmosphere of racial hate. His father, David Baldwin, who died when the author was eighteen (and whom he afterward discovered, to his shock, to have been only his stepfather), was a proud, cruel, charming, remote, and physically abusive Pentecostal preacher from New Orleans whose love for God was matched only by his enmity for white people. He maintained that "none of them were to be trusted," an attitude that Baldwin could hardly regard as inexplicable, given his own early, deeply embittering experiences with racial discrimination, which, despite his close friendships with several white classmates, helped breed in his heart a malice toward whites not unlike his father's—and a malice, too, toward blacks, who along with whites had helped to create the bleak and violent Harlem that he knew.

1 *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*, by James Campbell; Viking, 306 pages, $21.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yet the young Baldwin fought off the racist hate which had made his father "the most bitter man I have ever met": for "blackness and whiteness did not matter; to believe that they did was to acquiesce in one's own destruction. Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law." At fourteen, driven by an egotism no less formidable than his father's and by a desire to "break . . . his hold over me," the young Baldwin had himself become a preacher, in competition with his father; and he remained one till the end of high school, at which time, having already situated himself at the heart of a mostly white literary circle (including the future publisher Emile Capouya and the photographer-to-be Richard Avedon), he exchanged God for art and Harlem for Greenwich Village.

"The son must slay the father," Baldwin was fond of saying, and he applied the remark not only to his difficult relationship with David Baldwin but to his strange filial tie to Richard Wright. The author of *Native Son* was an early hero and mentor—helping Baldwin to win the fellowship that paid for his move to Paris—but at age twenty-four Baldwin rebelled against him, arguing in the essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" (an attack on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) that Wright's story of Bigger Thomas, like Stowe's slavery tale, fails to rise above the level of racial propaganda to that of artistic truth. For truth, he writes,

> is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted. This is the prime concern, the frame of reference; it is not to be confused with a devotion to humanity which is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause; and Causes, as we know, are notoriously bloodthirsty. We have, as it seems to me, in this most mechanical and interlocking of civilizations, attempted to lop this creature down to the status of a time-saving invention. He is not, after all, merely a member of a Society or a Group or a deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science. He is—and how old-fashioned the words sound!—something more than that, something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims. . . . The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.

Two years later, in the essay "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin made a full-scale attack on *Native Son*, arguing that novels, whether about blacks or whites, should traffic not in political simplicities but in human complexities, in "the heat and horror and pain of life itself where all men are betrayed by greed and guilt and blood lust and where no one's hands are clean." Wright was not pleased. Ridiculing Baldwin's "art for art's sake crap," he maintained, Campbell tells us, "that all literature was protest. All literature may be protest, Baldwin replied, but not all protest is literature." So strongly did Baldwin feel about such matters that in Paris, according to the novelist Richard Gibson, he avoided a café popular with other black American writers because "[h]e did not feel comfortable in the leftist atmosphere of the place." He excoriated Norman Mailer, whose romantic ideas about blacks in his essay "The White Negro" Baldwin saw as little more than a modern version of the "noble savage" stereotype. Campbell quotes an old friend of Baldwin's as saying that in those days he "was very insistent that he was not a black writer but an American one—indeed an English-language writer"; so eager was he to avoid a crude sense of racial partisanship in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his writing that in his 1948 essay "The Harlem Ghetto" he speaks of "we" Americans and refers to Negroes as "they." "Relations between Negroes and whites," he asserted in an early review, "must be based on the assumption that there is one race and we are all part of it"; if he rejected Wright's protest fiction, he celebrated the artistry of Ralph Ellison, "the first Negro novelist I have ever read to utilize in language, and brilliantly, some of the ambiguity and irony of Negro life."

Baldwin's own most valiant attempt to capture the "ambiguity and irony of Negro life" was his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), which centers on a Harlem family not unlike his own. Like the Trinitarian God, the book is divided into three parts: John, who is the focus of the first and third parts (and who, like Baldwin, is known as "Frog Eyes"), is the stepson of Gabriel, a preacher who believes "that all white people [are] wicked, and that God [is] going to bring them low," and who feels that God has promised him a son to carry on his holy work; the second part, itself divided in three and consisting largely of flashbacks, outlines the earlier lives of Gabriel (who many years ago, we learn, had a mistress and an illegitimate son, both of whom died as a consequence of his refusal to acknowledge them), of Gabriel's sister Florence, and of his second wife, Elizabeth (whose ill-fated and fervently atheistic first lover, John's father, loved art as much as Gabriel loves God). Baldwin renders this family's inner history—the details of which John will probably never know, though it has profoundly influenced his own life—with both the tenderest sympathy and the harshest insight; he sees the life of faith from both inside and out, and by exploring the past through these several pairs of eyes not only conveys something of the richness and mystery of a family's life but reminds us that to understand is to forgive. And he does a remarkably vivid job of capturing the streets of New York as seen by a boy raised on Pentecostal sermons:

> And certainly perdition sucked at the feet of the people who walked there; and cried in the lights, in the gigantic towers; the marks of Satan could be found in the faces of the people who waited at the doors of movie houses; his words were printed on the great movie posters that invited people to sin. It was the roar of the damned that filled Broadway, where motor cars and buses and the hurrying people disputed every inch with death. *Broadway:* the way that led to death was broad, and many could be found thereon; but narrow was the way that led to life eternal, and few there were who found it.

The novel, whose style has something of the stateliness of the King James Bible and the music of black vernacular, splendidly evokes Harlem's sights and sounds, its frustrations and hypocrisies. Baldwin excels at small descriptive touches, as when Gabriel observes the "distant and angry compassion" in his illegitimate son's face. This is, as Campbell says, "Baldwin's most accomplished novel, technically, and his most disciplined," free of the "idealizations, the sentimentality, the jarring tones and overlong conversations, even the moral fervour, which, separately or all at once, were to mar, in part or whole, his later novels."

Yet Campbell is also right to call *Go Tell It on the Mountain* "somewhat stiff and formal." Though Baldwin aims for a natural-seeming lyricism (and though the novel does rise to beautiful lyrical heights), there is too often an air of contrivance about it. Like a sermon in a black church, the prose is sometimes poetic and inspired, sometimes windy, repetitious, bombastic. Baldwin hammers us relentlessly with biblical verses—and with good reason, for his purpose is to impress upon us the ubiquity of religion in John's family and his sense of being bound inextricably to God—but it doesn't take long before we're weary of it all and the verses seem like mere gimmickry. Many of the novel's more protracted sentences, too, which should sound fresh and musical—like hymns, say, with long melodic lines—strike one as rather too self-consciously con-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

structed; and the frequent flashbacks—which were to become a familiar device in Baldwin's work, as if to suggest the immense history that lies behind even the most seemingly negligible occurence in black America—are less dramatically effective than they are confusing.

Go Tell It on the Mountain was written in Paris, to which Baldwin had relocated in 1948—a move that to him "stank of betrayal" but that he felt compelled to make in order to "escape from the daily enormities of racism." Though he would spend years there in poverty, Paris was a place where he could safely live in a white neighborhood, eat in white restaurants, and take white lovers. Yet even there, he came to realize, he could not escape intolerance completely: in the essay "Equal in Paris," he recalls his arrest for possession of a stolen bedsheet, a crime of which he was acquitted but which made him the butt of laughter in court, a humiliation he would never forget. The people who laughed, he wrote, were representative of all those "who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of living is not real. I had heard it [laughter] so often in my native land that I had resolved to find a place where I would never hear it anymore. In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris, when it was borne in on me that this laughter is universal and can never be stilled." This is doubtless true; yet it should perhaps be noted that people who feel "at a safe remove from all the wretched" don't generally find the misfortunes of others particularly hilarious; it is the unfortunate, not the privileged, who tend to entertain themselves by laughing at the even less fortunate—or, for that matter, by committing racist acts.

Paris provides the chief setting for Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956). This short, meticulously composed book is the story of David, a handsome and well-to-do young white American who, while his fiancée, Hella, vacations in Spain, is both thrilled and horrified to find himself falling in love with a young Italian waiter named Giovanni. They have an affair, conducted mainly in Giovanni's one-room flat, which "was not large enough for two"; David, who has an "offhand" relationship with his fiancée, experiences with Giovanni a passion such as he has never known. Yet he chooses to return to Hella. "What kind of life can we have in this room?" he demands of Giovanni, and proceeds to "cling [to Hella] for my very life." He finds his love for Giovanni constricting, a prison in which he has been locked away from the world he knows; yet by rejecting that love, he brings on tragedy for Giovanni (and perhaps his fiancée, too) and builds for himself a loveless prison, a cell for one rather than two. He eventually learns—a major theme throughout Baldwin—that love can turn into its opposite: "there opened in me a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots." In one of the most powerful episodes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Gabriel admits to Deborah, his first wife, that the devilish neighborhood boy Royal is his son; the parallel scene in *Giovanni's Room* is one in which David admits to his fiancée his love for Giovanni. Both scenes are about sin and confession, the sin being the denial and betrayal of a loving relationship by a man whose fear and self-loathing and sense of vulnerability render him incapable of bridging the gap between self and other. David learns what Giovanni knew all along: that the love they shared was not profane but virtuous, and that evil has issued only from his denial of it, which has twisted his love for Giovanni into hate, and Giovanni's innocence and self-respect into corruption and self-abasement.

The story, which David narrates in flashback, abounds in witty observations of Paris and its denizens and in details that suggest how much one can read in people's faces, gestures, and movements. It moves with great elegance and psychological plausibility, and with a fine sense of dramatic inevitability, from its opening pages to the point, at page 90 or thereabouts, at which

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David finally surrenders to his love for Giovanni, telling the reader that "[w]ith everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes.*" There are vivid descriptions (Giovanni kisses David with a "strange insistent gentleness") and lyrical metaphors ("I felt myself flow toward him, as a river rushes when the ice breaks up"). The decorous, restrained tone and the fastidious qualifying phrases patently derive from Henry James, a great enthusiasm of Baldwin's at this time, while its deliberate simplicity and repetitiousness, and the frequent serial linkage of simple clauses with the word "and," betray a debt to Hemingway; like both writers, Baldwin is concerned here with the time-honored theme of Americans in Europe, with the clash of innocence and experience, of New World and Old World notions of sexual morality. Though its pacing might at times be faulted for being a bit too deliberate, its style for being a bit too self-consciously spare, and its periodic sentences for being a bit too impressed with their own stateliness, *Giovanni's Room* is wonderfully evocative both of its milieu and of David's inner conflict—a conflict that doubtless held great personal meaning for Baldwin but from which he manages, almost throughout, to distance himself successfully.

If David is very well drawn, however, perhaps the novel's weakest element is Giovanni. As Campbell points out, "Giovanni is the first of those intensely human, yet idealized, characters, with a touch of the saint about them, who were later to dominate Baldwin's fiction. . . . After Giovanni, they were mostly black." In fact, Giovanni is quite one-dimensional, an improbable embodiment of perfect affection, gentleness, probity, and fidelity. He is, in short, too good and loving to be true, and his climactic speech to David—"You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to *kill* him in the name of all your lying little moralities. . . . Is *this* what you should do to love?"—is completely ridiculous, making him sound like a cross between a Psych 101 student and the innocent little island girl who loved Lieutenant Cable in *South Pacific*. The novel is also marred by the melodramatic present-tense passages in which David, standing by a window in a Riviera château on the night before Giovanni's execution for murder, tries to imagine what Giovanni is seeing and feeling; and it is weakened, too, by the occasional manifest intrusion by Baldwin himself who, Campbell notes, couldn't "keep his own opinions and tone of voice out of his characters' mouths" after *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. These opinions and this tone—a kind of intimate, smug, world-weary drawl—make their first appearance here.

Giovanni's Room also marks the first significant appearance in Baldwin's longer fiction of the theme of homosexuality, which was to figure prominently in most of his novels. One gathers that Baldwin accepted his homosexuality with relative ease; Campbell writes that no sooner did Baldwin discover his proclivities than he began to "confess" them to everyone:

> Baldwin urged himself to own up to it, to confess, confession being the spirit's cleansing operation. . . . Baldwin was determined not to treat his homosexuality like a skeleton in the cupboard—if you can't be frank about that, then until it's in the open you can't be frank about anything else. . . . By 'going public' in this way, he pre-empted the shame which was usually attendant upon a homosexual life in those days. Baldwin had grown up to the shocking discovery that the colour of his skin stood between him and the possibility of life lived to its full potential—between him and life itself, in fact. He made up his mind not to allow his sexual orientation to fortify the barrier.

The logical connections here seem rather hazy. Surely Campbell cannot mean to say that Baldwin viewed homosexuality as something of which one must be spiritually cleansed; and even if such were the case, how did telling people about it effect such a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"cleansing"? How did it "pre-empt shame"? And how did it make his sexuality less of a barrier? Campbell writes that Baldwin's "desire for women, or perhaps for the sense of normality and orthodoxy which relationships with women conferred, was not extinguished altogether." But heterosexual desire and a longing for "normality" are two utterly different things. If Baldwin slept with women for reasons other than sexual attraction, what does this say about his supposed lack of discomfort about his homosexuality?

Baldwin's Paris years, in Campbell's words, mark his "heyday as an artist." Returning to America in 1957, he threw himself into the civil-rights movement, whereupon—finding himself in the American South for the first time in his life, embroiled in extremely dramatic confrontations and aligned with other people of color who did not hesitate to sketch in stark black and white a picture that he had always insisted upon painting in shades of gray—he lost control of that exquisite mechanism by which he had theretofore controlled his rage. "Baldwin's true subject," writes Campbell, "was his difficult history," and though his powerful and long-suppressed rage could be explained only by the complex circumstances of that personal history, he chose, in the Sixties and thereafter, to regard that rage as his racial inheritance, pure and simple, as something he shared *tout à fait* with every other black American. The man who had written in *Notes of a Native Son* about his love of America now, in the early Sixties, referred to Americans as "the most unattractive people on earth." And he began to rewrite his own history, claiming untruthfully in 1970 that his best friends in Paris had been "Algerians and Africans" and writing about Martin Luther King and other civil-rights leaders after their deaths in a way that suggested he'd been closer to them than he really had. Campbell offers the most sympathetic possible reading of all this: "If he inflated his importance within the top echelon of the black leadership, it was to help prop up a spirit that died each time a limb of that leadership was broken off." Perhaps. (And perhaps, to be less charitable about it, he was responding to the irony that he'd left the pulpit to join the mainstream culture, only to see a fellow preacher become the most celebrated black American of his time.) Underlying such prevarications, one imagines, must have been a profound and long-buried sense of guilt about consorting with whites—and a superego that spoke in the voice of his racist stepfather.

During this period Baldwin's elegant style deteriorated—some might say disappeared. Sent the galley proofs of his novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, the once-fastidious writer shocked his editors by not even bothering to return them: "Do what you like," he said. The writer who had identified with the classical tradition now described himself as a "blues singer" or a "jazz musician" in prose; the writer who had revered figures like Henry James and T. S. Eliot now claimed that Eliot was "not a poet" because he wrote from "culture" rather than experience; the writer who had denied "that the Negro has it worse than anybody else" now maintained precisely the opposite. One after another of his post-Paris writings promotes the idea that all blacks are victims, all whites oppressors. His 1964 play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* traffics in much the same sort of stereotyping that he had criticized in his early essays. "I fear you are becoming a 'NEGRO' writer—and a propaganda one, at that!" Langston Hughes wrote him in 1962. Alas, he was; and over the course of the Sixties and Seventies, his literary stock plunged dramatically.

To read about the *après*-Paris Baldwin is to notice striking parallels between his career and Mailer's. Baldwin set out to "beat" Richard Wright as Mailer set out to beat Hemingway; as Mailer rejected the "Jewish novelist" label, so Baldwin sought to avoid being pigeonholed as a Negro novelist. Both wrote first novels that were evocative but also rather conventional, unadventurous, and overstuffed; both wrote second novels that were spare, idiosyncratic, and populated with bohemians. Both became at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

least as well known for their controversial nonfiction as for their fiction; and it might be said of Mailer, as Campbell says of Baldwin, that "the intellect, not the imagination, was [his] strong suit," and the personal essay, not the novel, his natural territory. Both writers' heads were turned by the political events of the Sixties, both tried to place themselves at the center of the action and to be identified with anti-establishment causes, and both tended to be seen by the leaders of the movements with which they associated themselves as naïve, frivolous, egocentric, and unreliable interlopers whose involvement might ultimately do the cause more harm than good. (According to Campbell, King kept his distance from Baldwin because he found his homosexuality offensive, saying that he would be "better qualified to lead a homosexual movement than a civil rights movement.") Yet while the turmoil of the Sixties had no discernible effect on Mailer's attitude toward his Jewishness, and made it possible for him to write books that drew profitably upon his singular talents, Baldwin became fixated on racial issues, writing books and articles that often seemed resolutely anti-literary. One can only wonder whether Baldwin was punishing himself for his years of devotion to literature, his interracial friendships, and his magnificent success beyond the ghetto—a success which he may well have subconsciously regarded, thanks to his stepfather's conditioning, as a mark not of talent and perseverance but of betrayal.

This is not to suggest that Baldwin went over completely to the most radical elements in the Black Power movement. On the contrary, the distinctive mark of his work in the Sixties and after is a bemusing mixture of liberality and racism, of love and hate, that seems to have been designed to please both black radicals and white liberals but succeeded in pleasing neither—for his language was too fancy and his politics too tame for one party and his sentences too sloppy and his rhetoric too hostile for the other. Consider, for example, the slack and highly personalized account of the Black Muslims that makes up most of his book *The Fire Next Time* (1963). On the one hand, he takes the Black Muslims seriously, handling their outrageously racist credo with kid gloves, and speaks of Elijah Muhammed (who was patently a father figure for him) with something close to affection; on the other hand, he makes a point of the fact that, after hearing Elijah and other Black Muslim leaders inveigh against the "white devils" (i.e., caucasians), he went off to have drinks with some "white devils" who were friends of his. He concludes the second of the piece's three parts with a denunciation of religions that preach hate: "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him"; likewise, after the book's publication, he acknowledged that the Black Muslims were "racists" who "batten[ed] on the despair of black men." Yet he would not attack individual blacks, refusing, when Eldridge Cleaver maligned him, to respond in kind; indeed, he was, in Campbell's words, "almost automatically loyal to black leadership," however irresponsible, managing to "skate over" the activists' Maoism, indoctrination programs, and advocacy of violence. So quick was he to equate black with good and white with evil, in fact, that when Malcolm X was killed by a black man, Baldwin blamed the crime on whites, telling a reporter that "[t]he hand that pulled the trigger did not buy the bullet. That bullet was forged in the crucible of the Western world." As if this were not enough, he spoke in 1968 of the imminent possibility of an anti-black holocaust in America.

This preoccupation with racial categories—a preoccupation that Baldwin had once deplored—is ubiquitous in the novels following *Giovanni's Room*. He embraces, for instance, the image of blacks as better lovers, as people who are more free-spirited and in touch with their bodies than whites—a stereotype he had once rebuked Mailer for propagating. As Campbell notes, these novels feature "too many bloodless characters, too neatly divided into goodies and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

baddies; too strong a dependence on colour as an indicator of virtue . . . ; too many rambling conversations and descriptions . . . ; too many rhetorical passages which belong not to the narrator but to James Baldwin." They also feature jeremiads about race, often hysterically anti-white, and occasional horror stories about white injustices against blacks, some of them cropping up in anecdotes told by characters and some forming part of the main narrative. As in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, lines from hymns are frequently interpolated without comment, in order to underscore one theme or another; but the device generally seems less appropriate to these books than to Baldwin's debut novel, and he employs it so often that it ends up seeming like little more than a contrivance, a bad habit. There are also quotations from jazz and blues and gospel lyrics—so many of them, indeed, in novels containing virtually no literary allusions, that one begins to get the impression that, in Baldwin's view, these lyrics occupy some unique cultural plane, illuminating black American life in a way the great authors of the Western tradition could never do. (What's more, the black characters in these later novels habitually drop the first names of such singers as Billie Holiday and Mahalia Jackson, as if their common skin color made them all sisters and brothers and thus entitled them to first-name familiarity.)

Plotless, repetitious, and self-indulgent, Baldwin's post-Paris novels abound in confusing flashbacks and in overlong conversations of a sort that one can imagine Baldwin having after midnight in some Paris bistro and being impressed with himself for having; stylistically, they are not far removed from the potboilers of an Irving Wallace or a Jerome Weidman. The usual best-seller themes—fame, money, showbiz, sex—are almost invariably present, the notable difference being that much of the sex is gay or interracial (or both) and much of the conversation about race; the other recurrent story elements tend to divide into those that are reminiscent of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (black preachers, Harlem) and those that recall *Giovanni's Room* (gay love affairs in France). Throughout these books various characters address one another as "baby" and refer to third parties as "cats," and, in general, sound like James Baldwin. In three of them, the protagonists—all black men, and all, like Baldwin, artists of some kind—either die young or survive early heart attacks, as if to suggest that the strain of trying to succeed as a black artist in America is too much for them; and everyone spends a lot of time in bars and restaurants and cafés, drinking and chatting and laughing, so that Baldwin's intended points about the agonies of black American life don't come across as powerfully as they might.

The first of these novels, *Another Country* (1962), introduces us to a young Harlem musician named Rufus, whom Baldwin, on the book's second page, describes melodramatically as "one of the fallen—for the weight of this city was murderous—one of those who had been crushed on the day, which was every day, these towers fell." We are expected to understand that Rufus is a tragic case, a brilliant artist and sensitive soul destroyed by American racism. But we're not convinced; Rufus comes off simply as a messed-up young man full of hostility toward "all those white sons of bitches out there." Torn between this rage and his personal ties to individual whites—for, as it happens, his best friend, Vivaldo, is white, as is his girlfriend, Leona—Rufus eventually jumps to his death from the George Washington Bridge. Baldwin spends the rest of the book bringing together Rufus's nearest and dearest so that they can (a) pair off and have sex and (b) talk about love and race and the meaning of Rufus's death. Vivaldo and Ida, Rufus's sister, become lovers, and she spends much of her time asserting that he and Rufus could never *really* have been friends because of the color line: "Somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy because he was white. Somewhere in his heart Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black." Vivaldo, she says, doesn't know what it's like to be black

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(as if blackness meant precisely the same thing to every black person), and thus didn't know what it was like to be Rufus, and thus was unable to save him. She comes off as a caricature of an Angry Black Woman, but Baldwin plainly wants us to see her as tormented, wants us to recognize and be moved by the truth of her claims; if once he had repudiated racial divisions, here he seems to endorse a view of those divisions as absolute and unbridgeable, and to subscribe to the notion that blacks, by virtue of their skin color, are acquainted with certain things about which whites can never so much as earn the right to have an opinion. Yet he also seems to agree with the preacher at Rufus's funeral who says, "The world's already bitter enough, we got to try to be better than the world."

When not discussing race, the folks in *Another Country* wax poetic about life and love. Bedding down Vivaldo, Rufus's ex-lover Eric wonders: "how old was this rite, this act of love, how deep? in impersonal time, in the actors?" Afterward, he says: "Maybe, at this very moment, while both of us are huddled here, hiding from things which frighten us—maybe you love me and I love you as well as we'll ever love, or be loved, in this world." (Where, one wonders, does all this leave Eric's lover, who is to arrive from France within a few days? Baldwin doesn't seem to care, and it doesn't seem to occur to him that *we* might; the important thing to him, apparently, is that there be sex scenes and portentous post-coital homilies.) There are, to be sure, some fine descriptive passages here. Baldwin is good on New York and its denizens, on Ida's singing (which derives its strength from "a sense of the self so profound and so powerful that it does not so much leap barriers as reduce them to atoms"), at capturing certain little things that happen between people. When Richard cuffs his son lightly on the head, for instance, the boy "always reacted . . . with a kind of surly, withdrawn delight; seeming to say to himself, each time, that he loved his father enough to overlook an occasional lapse of dignity."

Baldwin once described Leo Proudhammer, the hero and narrator of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), as "Rufus qui n'est pas un suicide." Leo is America's greatest black actor, and the novel tells his rags-to-riches story, or, more accurately, presents a hodgepodge of memories upon which Leo reflects after surviving a heart attack at thirty-nine. Born in Harlem, he became an actor in order to rise above himself, his limitations, and his rage. Art is his means of deliverance, of self-transformation, and Baldwin (whom one friend described as "fundamentally an actor") devotes a considerable amount of self-dramatizing rhetoric to this theme. Upon achieving his first great theatrical success, Leo realizes that "[i]f I kept the faith, I could do for others what I felt had not been done for me, and if I could do that, if I could give, I could live." Art is for Leo, then, a matter of faith, of ministry; yet both Baldwin and Leo seem to confuse the artist's ministry with the very different ministry of the black leader or role model. The irony of Leo's life, and his abiding source of frustration, is that he will never be hired to play the great "white" roles—Hamlet, Lear—and will thus never achieve the level of artistic fulfillment of which he is capable; for all his wealth and fame, then, we are meant to see that he is not less of a victim than other blacks but rather a greater, more tragic victim, the very personification of his people's afflictions.

Needless to say, Baldwin's representation of Leo's predicament tells us much about his view of himself; indeed, one frequently has the feeling that one is reading not about Leo, America's greatest black actor, but about Baldwin, America's most famous black writer. Lazily and playfully, Baldwin incorporates various autobiographical elements into the book, bequeathing to Leo his views on race and art, the tone of his voice, and the curve of his life. (Leo even shares one of Baldwin's friends, Marlon Brando, whose name he drops.) His implausibly loving, flawless, and uncomplicated relationship with a street boy much younger than himself (who, Leo tells us, is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"black in color, black in pride, black in rage"—but not so full of rage, apparently, as to interfere seriously with Leo's fun) comes across as a sketchy, romanticized version of some real-life liaison, rather than as a fully focused and integrated part of the fiction. Finally, the novel is so crammed with tacky bits relating to Hollywood, the Oscars, etc., that at times Baldwin appears to be as interested in the hardships that accompany movie stardom as in those that accompany negritude.

Its brevity, tidily developed plot, and unglamorous protagonists make *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) an exception among Baldwin's later novels. Set in Harlem, the story is simple, not dissimilar to many of the nightmare anecdotes of racial persecution in his other books. It focuses on a young couple, the pregnant nineteen-year-old Tish and her boyfriend, Fonny, who is wrongly arrested for rape. Contrasted with this beautiful and loving twosome are white Americans, whose only function here is to taunt and threaten (the one good caucasian is an Italian immigrant who stands up for Fonny against a vicious white cop). Tish, supposedly a typical Harlem girl, tells her story in preposterously literary, even poetic, language; it's as if Baldwin had either lost touch with the vernacular or lost interest in reproducing it. Throughout the book, moreover, he puts racist talk in his characters' mouths and doesn't give us any reason to think he finds it excessive.

If *Another Country* centers on a musician and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* on an actor, Baldwin's last and longest novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979), features a gospel singer named Arthur Montana who is billed as "THE SOUL EMPEROR" and who, as the novel opens, has just died in his early forties. Arthur's older brother and manager, Hall, serves as narrator, recalling, in a patchwork of flashbacks, their upbringing in Harlem, Arthur's rise to fame and discovery of his homosexuality, and the brothers' involvement in the civil-rights movement. The book represents little more than a reshuffling of the ingredients of the two aforementioned novels, from the references to the transcendent power of art to the big, empty pronouncements made by our narrator, who, like his author, has seen all, done all, and knows all, and appears to regard himself as a sage. At one point Hall reflects that the American pioneers "had brought to the savage an unprecedented savagery. The red-skinned tribes were right: the land is not to be bought or sold. The blacks were right: a man is not to be used as a thing. The tom-tom and the smoke signal and the talking drums are true, and the gods are many." That these reflections might pack more punch if Hall were not, at the moment, jetting comfortably across America, a cigarette in one hand and a magazine in the other, doesn't seem to have occurred to Baldwin: in these later novels, the bizarre spectacle of black characters at once condemning and living the American dream is not uncommon.

Of all Baldwin's novels, his last is perhaps his feeblest. To convey how deeply Hall misses his dead brother, Baldwin has him say that "I miss him, miss, miss, miss, miss him, miss him worse than you miss a toothache [?], worse than you miss the missing tooth, worse than you miss the missing leg, even worse than you miss the stillborn baby." So that we may hear about Arthur's sojourn in Paris, Hall is temporarily replaced by an omniscient narrator; later, his narrative voice gives way, without so much as a one-line break in the text, to Jimmy's. And no other Baldwin novel contains more pointless details and more perplexing attempts at humor: "Thousands and thousands of people at the airport, multitudes, multitudes, going where? Everywhere: and, furthermore, Everywhere is numbered. Flight 123 to Dayton, Flight 246 to Tucson, Flight 890 to Dallas, Flight 333 to Birmingham, Flight 679 to Denver, Flight 321 to Washington, three-four to Baltimore, five-six to Pick Up Sticks, three-four-five-six-seven, and all good niggers go to heaven."

Baldwin never really settled down after his return to America. Instead, "a stranger every-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where," he spent the rest of his life as a self-styled "transatlantic commuter," now in New York, now in Paris, now in Istanbul. His later novels were written by a man too distracted by his public life to devote the necessary effort to his art, and too taken with the ideas of racial propagandists to be the artist that he had it in him to be. As a young man, he had recognized that what people share as children of God transcends what divides them, and that what does distinguish them as individuals—and makes them interesting and distinctive as human beings—has only partially, and in the most complex and ambiguous ways, to do with matters of race or ethnicity. He knew that the more fully one understands the intricacies of a given human situation, the less importance categories will have; he knew that to respond to hate with hate is self-destructive, and that to react to a tyrant's categorization of yourself by centering your identity (and basing your sense of pride) on that category is to capitulate to his vision of you, to cooperate in your own dehumanization. Baldwin is eloquent on this subject in his early essays. After his return from Europe, however, and the manifestation in his fiction of a rage that seems often to have been impossible to control, he began to identify that rage as a corollary of his status as a black American. But the particular circumstances of his upbringing—the pride that made him acutely conscious of his own smallness and plainness, the homosexuality that violated the fundamentalist faith on which he had been raised, the lifelong association of his tyrannical father with God, and the unsettling discovery that his father was not his father after all—all these factors certainly contributed mightily to his precarious sense of self, his inability to settle permanently in any one place or with any one person, and the overpowering fury that seemed, at times, to be that of a man who could not decide whether he was a native son or an outsider.

If there is a problem with Campbell's biography, it is that, in his admirable determination to focus on the development of Baldwin's literary career and not on the sensational details of his personal life, he doesn't come quite as close to the heart of these conflicts as one might desire. One emerges from this book with only the vaguest sense of what it felt like to be James Baldwin, and only the fuzziest images of the people who were closest to him. One might wish, too, that Campbell, a Scotsman, were more familiar with certain American figures and institutions that figure in this story: for instance, he misspells Sidney Hook's first name and doesn't seem aware of the hostility that existed between J. Edgar Hoover and Robert F. Kennedy (both of whom considered Baldwin a dangerous radical). But enough: these are minor cavils about an unusually intelligent, concise, and responsible study whose author knows politics from art, knows the good work from the bad, is capable of feeling sympathy and even affection for his subject while seeing him very clearly, and doesn't hesitate to pass severe judgments or to acknowledge that most of the later work is hopelessly disfigured by anger and bigotry. He recognizes, in short, that it does Baldwin no great service to pretend that his later writings are any better than they were; and he recognizes, too, that to acknowledge Baldwin's falling-off, and to try to understand how it came to pass, is to begin to appreciate how heroic an achievement his finest work really was.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A very Sixties person: Peter Schjeldahl on art

by Roger Kimball

And after all, if stupidity did not, when seen from within, look so exactly like talent as to be mistaken for it, and if it could not, when seen from outside, appear as progress, genius, hope, improvement, doubtless no one would want to be stupid, and there would be no stupidity. Or at least it would be very easy to combat it. But unfortunately there is something very winning and natural about it. . . . The long and short of it is, there is no important idea that stupidity does not know how to make use of, for it can move in all directions and is able to wear all the garments of truth. Truth, on the other hand, has only one garment and one road and is always at a disadvantage.

—Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*

It's weird how it happens. My first glance at the show told me it was junk. With my second glance, I was in heaven.

—Peter Schjeldahl, in *The Village Voice* (1991)

It is one of the peculiarities of the contemporary cultural situation that much of what commands public attention does so by default. This is not simply to say that there is a lot of mediocre (or worse) art about: it is in the nature of things that superlative artistic achievement should be rare, mediocrity the rule. The problem today is less the prevalence of mediocrity than the disruption of the cultural assumptions that nurture or even recognize artistic excellence. The unpleasant and mostly unacknowledged truth is that, at least since the late Sixties, almost everything that has been catapulted into artistic celebrity is not even mediocre. Let us be blunt: what we have seen in the art world in the last two decades has been an explosion of meretricious pap. Yes, there have been exceptions—a few, a handful. Yet by and large the cynosures of cultural fashion in the art world—the Johnses, Rauschenbergs, and Warhols, the Robert Mapplethorpes and Mike Kelleys, the Cindy Shermans and Jenny Holzers—do not belong to the history of artistic achievement at all. They belong instead to the roster of improbable marketing triumphs if not, indeed, to the annals of psychopathology. In short, what we have been witnessing is at best art with a snigger—at worst, something considerably more sinister. The dreary fact that some of these names have enjoyed the perquisites of artistic celebrity for well over a quarter of a century now is less a comment on the quality of their work (after all, we have repeatedly been assured of late that "quality" is a forbidden concept) than it is a reflection of our culture's bewilderment. The nature of the bewilderment snaps into focus when we ask ourselves what it means that grown people, adults, should proclaim Andy Warhol a great artist. The answer, alas, lies somewhere along the spectrum between besotted infatuation with cultural fashion and nihilistic cynicism.

It is perhaps some consolation to know that the collapse of the art market will almost certainly begin to change this. Once

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they stop appreciating like a Wall Street broker's fantasy stock, Warhol's silkscreened Marilyns no less than Jenny Holzer's electronically-processed inanities, Rauschenberg's Combines, or Mapplethorpe's photographs of indelicately placed bullwhips will start to look a lot different to many people. When the euphoria dissipates, it will suddenly become clear that such art never possessed much if any aesthetic merit, that its chief claim to attention was as a social-political "statement" or as an investment opportunity. As the latter erodes, the former will seem less and less attractive. In time—and we may hope that it will not be a long time—most such tawdry productions will recede from the museum walls and find their way to the storerooms and to out-of-the-way exhibition cases featuring exotic anthropological curiosities. Perhaps we might even hope that a few of Warhol's Brillo Boxes will one day be put to meet use storing a certain popular brand of abrasive cleaning implement.

However this cheering scenario unfolds in detail, it is not too soon to begin assessing the sensibility that commented on and abetted the artistic trivialities of the last couple of decades. For while the phenomena under discussion did not themselves spark anything that can be called "criticism" in the usual meaning of the term, they did and continue to spawn an abundance of words. And this verbal co-efficient—part hype and public relations, part political rationalization and philosophical doodling—offers a revealing correlative of the art culture of our time. One of the most typical, and also most articulate, practitioners of this species of verbal embroidery is the New York critic Peter Schjeldahl. The recent publication of two collections of his writings, *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978-1990* and *The "7 Days" Art Columns, 1988-1990*, provides a good occasion to reflect upon the state of contemporary American art culture and the values it espouses.[1]

Now in his late forties, Mr. Schjeldahl made his reputation primarily as a frequent contributor to *The Village Voice* and *The New York Times* Arts & Leisure page in the 1960s and early 1970s. He has also written for a number of more or less specialized art journals, including *Art News*, *Art International*, and *Art in America*, as well as for a handful of lesser-known publications. He has produced numerous catalogue essays and monographs on individual artists from Joan Miró and Fairfield Porter to the ubiquitous Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, and other contemporary icons. What we might call his trendiness quotient is indicated by the dozen or so pieces he wrote for *Vanity Fair* in the mid-1980s as well as by his appointment as art critic for the New York weekly *7 Days*, an appointment that he held throughout the paper's brief existence, from 1988 to 1990. Currently, he is once again writing regularly about art for *The Village Voice*.

While Mr. Schjeldahl is hardly a household name, over the years he has acquired a certain prominence as a barometer of chic taste. As he confided in a revealing statement from the mid-1970s, "I get top dollar when I'm nervy enough to demand it"; no doubt he continues to, and does so often. One measure of Mr. Schjeldahl's cachet is his inclusion in the University of California's Lannan Series of Contemporary Art Criticism. *The Hydrogen Jukebox* is the second volume to appear in the series underwritten by the Lannan Foundation, and it must be said that Mr. Schjeldahl has been exceptionally well served by his publisher. The book is made to last much longer than most of the art Mr. Schjeldahl writes about. It is handsomely designed and set in a classic typeface, printed on good paper, bound in sewn signatures. A miscellany of some fifty pieces, the volume provides an overview of Mr. Schjel-

1 *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978-1990*, edited by MaLin Wilson, with an introduction by Robert Storr; University of California Press, 358 pages, $29.95. *The "7 Days" Art Columns, 1988-1990*, by Peter Schjeldahl; The Figures, 205 pages, $12.50 (paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dahl's writing about art and culture over the last two decades. As befits a production from a prestigious university press, it comes complete with an extensive bibliography of Mr. Schjeldahl's writings.

Unfortunately, the disparity between the book's appearance and its contents could not be greater; perhaps it's another layer of irony, meant to drive home the fissure between the way things seem to be and the way they are; in any event, if *The Hydrogen Jukebox* (except for its title) has the sober look and feel of a serious scholarly work, what it contains is as ephemeral as newsprint. Naturally, efforts have been made to conceal this. For one thing, the book comes to us with an admiring introduction by Mr. Schjeldahl's friend Robert Storr, who is now a curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Like Tweedledee and Tweedledum, Messrs. Schjeldahl and Storr have been touting each other for quite some time; we note that Mr. Schjeldahl returns his friend's favor with an introduction to a catalogue for an exhibition that is currently on view in Philadelphia.

Even so, in the present volume Mr. Storr does go to rather extravagant lengths. It's not just that he describes his pal as "the essential critical stylist of our jumpy but incandescent fin de siècle"—that can be discounted as the usual throat-clearing promotional piffle that touts indulge in as a warm-up. Nor is it simply that he expatiates on the brave and "difficult" life that Mr. Schjeldahl, the scion of a rich Midwestern manufacturing family, has chosen in becoming a free-lance writer, "surviving as best [he] can outside or at the margins of the art world's increasingly corporate structures." Perhaps that can be forgiven as contributing the requisite dollop of bohemian ambiance. It's the *kind* of critical intelligence that he attributes to his friend that is insupportable. Sample: "he possesses in exceptional measure the insatiable avidity that distinguishes the self-made man of taste. In him the febrile curiosity of Baudelaire and the unapologetic omnivorousness of Whitman meet." Now, whatever else Peter Schjeldahl is or isn't, his "taste" is no more "self-made" than is a sculpture by Jeff Koons. On the contrary, his entire career has been predicated precisely on his sacrificing the prerogatives of taste to the imperatives of the moment. One might say that the whole point of a writer like Mr. Schjeldahl is not to have any taste of his own; that is one of his greatest assets: he has plenty of personality but no critical convictions. In this sense, however "avid" he may be, Mr. Schjeldahl is less a critic than a bellwether: that tinkle you hear is the echo of whatever the current art world fancies.

Baudelaire and Whitman are another matter. In order to understand Mr. Schjeldahl's persona—and to understand his writing on art, we must consider his persona, for the two are nearly synonymous—we must realize that he regards himself first of all as a poet. *The Hydrogen Jukebox* even includes a few examples of his verse—presumably examples of which he thinks particularly well, since he chose to reprint them. In fact, these artifacts do not really register *as poems.* Considered as intellectual or perhaps characterological symptoms, however, they are quite revelatory. Consider the specimen called "I Missed Punk" (1979), which begins by explaining that "I missed punk / because my record player was broken," and concludes with this bit of advice and pontification:

> Never resist an idea
> Never say no to a contradiction
> They have come to help you
> smash the ego
> which always reconstitutes
> (and if it doesn't, well,
> your worries are over)

Anyone who pages through these volumes will instantly recognize that this may stand as a kind of credo for Mr. Schjeldahl. The friendly exploitation of contradiction, especially, is one of his trademarks.

It says a great deal about the contemporary art world's requirements that Mr. Schjeldahl

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

should have emerged as a representative salesman for its wares, indeed, for its ethos, its view of the world. The fit is perfect. The art world has needed an impresario, Mr. Schjeldahl a platform. Nor is he without his virtues. His insistence that "until you see a painting in person you haven't begun to see it at all" is as salutary as it is rare at a time when many critics habitually write about art they have seen only in catalogue reproductions. Moreover, unlike most academically inclined writers on art, Mr. Schjeldahl is capable of writing with flair and is not afraid to reveal great enthusiasm for the art that he claims to like. His diction is *au courant* but seldom burdened by jargon. He also has a small but winning rhetorical gift, which inclines to the epigrammatic. In this respect, he is often witty and not infrequently astringently perceptive, as when he observes that Mark Rothko's "only resource against the decorative was the corny" or, of Hollywood, that "what it doesn't overshadow it infects." In many respects, Mr. Schjeldahl's style is a demotic and more dour version of Frank O'Hara's, the poet-critic upon whom he has most conspicuously modeled himself. His writing is clear, breezy, personal; Mr. Schjeldahl is onstage as much as, often more than, the objects or ideas he discusses. In Mr. Storr's words, Mr. Schjeldahl is "the ultimate subject of his texts."

Indeed, it is fitting that the book's title essay, "The Hydrogen Jukebox: Terror, Narcissism, and Art" (1978), should be as much about narcissism as art. It is a remarkable performance, pushing a diapason of correct emotional buttons while maintaining an air of grave existential piety. Intellectually, it is the most ambitious piece in the book, but this isn't really Mr. Schjeldahl's fault. Large stretches of the essay betray an exceedingly intimate acquaintance with Christopher Lasch's book *The Culture of Narcissism*, unacknowledged except for a grudging endnote. As with so much of Mr. Schjeldahl's writing, the main point is not to mount an argument but to establish a tone, an atmosphere. This is accomplished mostly by the judicious manipulation of clichés. Thus Mr. Schjeldahl begins by suggesting that "disarray and morbidity of the arts in Western civilization represent . . . a long-term toxic effect of the atom-bomb terror of the last three decades." He is honest enough to note that "actual nuclear war" (as distinct, one supposes, from the sort he likes to imagine) has become increasingly remote, but he goes on to insist that the very prospect of Armageddon, however remote, "has also contributed to a progressive devastation of the higher expressions and finer sensibilities of Western cultures."

Perhaps Mr. Schjeldahl is himself an argument for this thesis. In any event, his main idea is that widespread terror at the prospect of nuclear war has made a belief in the future impossible. Hence, you see, the prevalence of narcissism in our culture; and hence, too, the disintegration of traditional cultural and moral values. Insofar as the essay can be said to have a point, it is to license a species of fashionable despair by referring personal failings to ineluctable forces. If things are really so bleak, he concludes, then to speak of "the value or meaning or quality of work being done is an indiscretion." Likewise, he suggests that in a situation of permanent emergency, "Only dullards" will believe in "the idea of a continuity of civilized existence." Such nihilistic posturings—they are too shifting to be called convictions—are everywhere in evidence in Mr. Schjeldahl's writing about art. Basically, they are added for effect. He delights in sounding the portentous note of impending if indefinite apocalypse. At the end of an essay about Andy Warhol, for example, he concludes that "Watching him watch the rich, one knows somehow that whatever may befall us in the rest of this century, there aren't going to be any lifeboats for anybody." Curtain.

What is most amusing about "The Hydrogen Jukebox" is the use Mr. Schjeldahl makes of Christopher Lasch's analysis of narcissism. Appropriating many of Lasch's formulations, he sometimes inadvertently saddles himself with Lasch's conclusions, which point in precisely the opposite direc-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion from Mr. Schjeldahl's impatience with values and the "continuity of civilized existence." It is especially droll to see him inadvertently invoke such things as the ideal of "self-controlled, work-directed, socially adapted adulthood" only to protest that there is "a lot" wrong with it because it rests on a "denial of pleasure": Well, yes, come to think of it self-control and commitment to work and society do involve that inconvenience. Above all, though, Mr. Schjeldahl's appropriation of Lasch's rhetoric illustrates one of the most attractive benefits of his policy of never resisting an idea, never saying no to a contradiction. What it means is that virtually any idea can be stretched to resemble its opposite. As ideas become fungible, contradiction is downgraded to a piquant rhetorical effect.

In any event, narcissism is much at issue throughout Mr. Schjeldahl's writings. In an interview he gave to—who else?—Robert Storr in 1982, he goes so far as to define criticism in terms that make it indistinguishable from narcissism. "I think," he tells Mr. Storr, that

> at the root of the critical impulse is some kind of adolescent outrage at growing up and discovering that the world is not nearly what you hoped or thought it might be. Criticism is then a career of trying to move the world over and make it more habitable for your own sensibility.

It is worth pausing to consider this description of the critical enterprise. As traditionally conceived, criticism is an attempt to arrive at the truth about its object of study. Mr. Schjeldahl, like many of his colleagues in the art world and in the academy today, seeks to replace truth with himself as the goal of criticism. The result is that criticism is less and less about the world of cultural objects and more and more about the sensibility of the critic. In this sense, criticism, instead of revealing the world, degenerates into a form of intellectual self-abuse. Characteristic is a piece that Mr. Schjeldahl published in *The Village Voice* this September in which he predicts that "As a practical matter, the favored mode of art will be installational. We won't much want the distracting complications of objects, with their commodity glamor and squalor . . ." Note well: The *distracting complications of objects*: no works of art, thank you, we're too busy thinking about ourselves.

The place that Mr. Schjeldahl accords to "adolescent outrage" in his scheme of criticism seems all the more telling when we consider that the title for *The Hydrogen Jukebox* comes from Allen Ginsberg's 1956 expression of adolescent outrage and counter-cultural despair, *Howl*—a poem that, as Mr. Schjeldahl informs us, he "always emulates."[2] As he notes in "Decade of Wonders," a brief meditation on and defense of the Sixties sensibility, he is himself a "sixties person," "very sixties," etc. Elsewhere (another "poem"), he confesses his worry about becoming "another scalp / on the belt of drug abuse and cultural devastation." Indeed. But the point is that almost everything that makes Mr. Schjeldahl so consummate a mouthpiece for the pieties of the contemporary art establishment he has inherited from the Sixties.

One important problem concerns what we might call grade inflation. While he is capable of dismissive condemnation—in one place, for example, he refers to Clement Greenberg as "the Reverend Moon of art criticism"—Mr. Schjeldahl's usual procedure is to emit clouds of praise suitably ornamented with oblique demurrals. Often, in fact, the fulsome praise that oozes from his critical "judgments" taxes one's credulity. For example, he blithely tells us that the Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha "may be the best regional painter in *modern history*" (my

2 It is not surprising that his own poems often feature the obsession with anaphora that Ginsberg, trivializing Whitman, popularized in *Howl*. Thus Mr. Schjeldahl's poem "To Pico": "You abstractly acknowledge the sun / You do not care / You are Los Angeles and not Los Angeles / You have unlimited, because unneeded, parking," etc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

italics). Similarly, Arshile Gorky (1905-1948) is said to have made "some of the greatest paintings of his time"—one wonders what Mr. Schjeldahl would do with (for example) Matisse, Bonnard, Picasso, Braque, Vuillard, to name only some continental competitors? "For a while there in the late sixties," we read, "Bruce Nauman was one of the most abundantly inventive artists anyone had ever seen"—that *anyone* had *ever* seen? Again: Mr. Schjeldahl remarks that the paintings de Kooning made after 1968—a time when the artist's powers had already seriously diminished—were "some of the freshest, wildest paintings anyone ever saw." And there's more: Robert Smithson's musings about art, published in 1979, are said to constitute "the most significant book of contemporary art writing in twenty years," while Mike Kelley, the man who made a name for himself exhibiting dirty stuffed animals and kindred other delights, "may be the most significant artist of his generation"; and on and on.

Perhaps such loads of treacle show how generous Mr. Schjeldahl is; maybe they betray his overpowering desire to be liked; whatever their origin, they bear witness to a profound critical paralysis. It is not only that he wildly overrates such ephemeral *poseurs* as Mike Kelley and Bruce Nauman; nor is it simply that that his extravagant praise for Gorky, the later de Kooning, et al., betokens a breathtaking lack of proportion; in the end, what is most damaging in such displays is the critical irresponsibility they indicate: it comes of never resisting an idea.

Equally damaging, and equally characteristic of the Sixties sensibility he embodies, is Mr. Schjeldahl's extraordinary historical myopia. Like so many critics and artists today, Mr. Schjeldahl lives in a bubble of the present, essentially unnourished by the past, unattracted to the future. He often as much as acknowledges this. In one of the "poems," for example, asking what he brought to his vocation as a critic, he notes "A rhetorical knack" along with "Abysmal ignorance, slovenly habits of thought, starstruck / narcissism. . . ." Not pretty, but not untrue, either. In an essay on minimalism, he puts it less melodramatically, explaining that when he arrived in New York in the early Sixties, "Andy Warhol and Frank Stella were already established masters, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg were old masters, and Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning occupied the farthest, mistiest reaches of the classical past" along with Marcel Duchamp, the grandfather of so much contemporary nonsense. He does occasionally write about artists from earlier eras —Velázquez, for instance, whom he describes as "Mr. Cool." "If he were a rock singer," Mr. Schjeldahl opines, "he would be Roy Orbison." Be that as it may, the misty reaches of the 1950s continue to circumscribe Mr. Schjeldahl's understanding of tradition and culture. He titles one essay "L.A. Demystified! Art and Life in the Eternal Present"; it could function as his motto.

Yet the most dispiriting thing about reading through Mr. Schjeldahl's criticism is the realization that we are dealing here with a botched talent. For while it cannot be said that he possesses a deep critical intelligence, there can be no doubt that, in addition to that "rhetorical knack," he is capable of genuine aesthetic response. This he has traded on ruthlessly, saying yes to one contradiction after the next. Thus it is that, in a recent piece in *The Village Voice*, he describes seeing an exhibition of thrift-store paintings at a downtown gallery. Noting frankly that the pictures were rubbish, he nonetheless goes on to exclaim that "with my second glance, I was in heaven." In other words, forget about the truth: let fashion reign. Not only does this represent the total abasement of critical duty: as Robert Musil recognized, it is also a particularly insidious version of stupidity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hazlitt's passions

by Joseph Epstein

In *The Birth of the Modern*, his panoramic history of world society between 1815 and 1830, Paul Johnson refers to William Hazlitt as "a truly great writer, perhaps the first truly modern writer in England." Johnson, working an extremely crowded canvas, never gets around to saying just why he thinks Hazlitt is perhaps the first truly modern writer in England. Yet his is an assertion that gains immediate assent; it feels, somehow, right. Among Hazlitt's contemporaries, Coleridge was certainly more wide-ranging, Wordsworth in his particular line deeper, Lamb more winning. But Hazlitt, for a multiplicity of reasons, feels more like our contemporary, which is another way of saying that he seems more modern.

Hazlitt, Our Contemporary—it sounds, I fear, like one of those rather dreary lectures read in a patches-on-the-elbows brown tweed jacket from yellowing paper, in which one attempts to make the case for the relevance of a writer whose work is obviously deader than a Rudy Vallee lyric. I should like to go at things from a different angle, since Hazlitt's writings are for the most part clearly and vibrantly alive, and attempt to show that his modernity, which is very real, does not always honor either him or us.

Hazlitt was an extraordinary writer, yet he was also a writer who had more flaws than the normal man. This might not matter but for the fact that much of what he wrote itself insists on doing away with the distinction between the man and the writer in him. He could be deeply stupid on some subjects and quite close-minded on others. He was awkward, passionate, shy, brilliant, and often foolish, a man of absolute integrity who was probably a genius, the word we fall back upon to explain talent of a power for which we cannot otherwise account. As Hazlitt said apropos of Cobbett, so more pertinently may one say apropos of Hazlitt: "It is easy to describe second-rate talents, because they fall into a class and enlist under a standard: but first-rate powers defy classification or comparison, and can be defined only by themselves."

About William Hazlitt's own talent there cannot be much argument. Paul Johnson notes that Hazlitt "has strong claims to be considered the first British art critic of significance," and Kenneth Clark called him "the best English critic before Ruskin." Thomas McFarland, in his book *Romantic Cruxes* (1988), writes that "he may be the finest pure critic of literature that English culture has brought forth"; and by pure critic Professor McFarland means a critic who does not write out of a moral or cultural program—he cites Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot—but rather deals directly with works of literary art. Keats marveled at Hazlitt's unerring "depth of Taste" in all things having to do with art. "We are mighty fine fellows," Robert Louis Stevenson once remarked to William Henley, "but we cannot write like William Hazlitt." P. G. Pat-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more, describing his friend Hazlitt's mental quickness, wrote: "Hazlitt could perceive and describe 'at sight' the characteristics of anything without any previous study or knowledge whatever, but by a species of intellectual intuition." Hazlitt himself said that he "never worshiped the Echo," by which he meant that he came by his views and opinions absolutely on his own.

William Hazlitt was born in dissent—no minor biographical fact—and died in discouragement. His was a short, disorderly, tumultuous, sad, and finally immensely impressive life. He lived fifty-two years, wrote several books, made many enemies, and died both broke and, it is fair to say, brokenhearted. Perhaps no writer of his quality was attacked so viciously in his lifetime as he, though he must have valued his enemies, at any rate to the extent of never for a moment having wanted them on his side, and he certainly came near giving as good as he got. (Keats held that Hazlitt "is your only good damner, and if ever I am damn'd—damn me if I shouldn't like him to damn me.") Perpetually harried by financial worry, he wrote nearly all his works under pressure and on the run. He produced brilliant criticism under the constraints of journalism; in his familiar essays he produced literature almost by the way, and into the bargain much improved the form by opening it up to more serious subjects. He was tactless, abrasive, dogmatic, obsessive, in many ways quite hopeless, and yet one of the few authentic heroes of literature.

William Hazlitt was born in 1778, the third surviving child of a dissenting minister of the Unitarian church who was never to live in anything approaching comfort. Upon his father's death, Hazlitt referred to him as his anchor, but the Reverend William Hazlitt was an anchor that bobbed about a good bit, going from one inadequate living to another. He had favored the side of America during the Revolutionary War, and this cost him favor and hence tenure at various churches he served. In 1783, he sailed for New England with his family, and after four years and much disappointment and illness discovered that the New World was not the solution either. Hazlitt wrote that he remembered "once hearing a shrewd man say that he would never send a son of his to my father, lest the boy should be so schooled in truth as to be disqualified from getting his living in the world." Hazlitt's father knew, and soon so would his son, that the things he most honored the world cared for but little. "One image," his son wrote, "he had set up in his mind: it was Truth. One idol he had: it was Justice. One aspiration he had: it was Liberty." Hazlitt loved his father, and wrote that "when I think of the thing I am, I know that all I most care to remember in what I have been and done, has come to me through him."

Between the ages of nine and fifteen Hazlitt lived, quite happily, in the market town of Wem, in Shropshire, on the border of Wales, where his father had his modest clerical living. At fifteen, he was sent off to the New College at Hackney, a Unitarian academy, on a scholarship that stipulated he study for the ministry. But before that the great formative event of Hazlitt's youth, and indeed of his life, had taken place: the Revolution in France. He was eleven when it occurred, but it would be at the center of much that he thought and did in the forty-one years left to him. "It seems to me," he later wrote, "as if I had set out in life with the French Revolution, and as if all that had happened before that were but a dream." And all afterwards, perhaps, something of a nightmare. "The light of the Revolution, dabbled though it now was with drops of crimson gore, still circled my head like a glory," he wrote. Hazlitt not only had his politics early fixed by the French Revolution, but early, too, learned the seriousness of politics. In 1791, the Birmingham home of the dissenting minister Joseph Priestly, a friend of Hazlitt's father, was robbed and burned by a mob goaded into action by Priestly's reply in opposition to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*. In politics, people of that day, as we should say today, played hardball.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By fifteen, then, Hazlitt had a nearly fully formed politics of his own. When the French Revolution went bloody, he blamed it on England's war against France, which he thought whipped up French hatred at the mere thought that the old monarchy, with all its abuses, might be restored. He saw the great, the central, the indispensable problem of his time as that of the need to free mankind from the tyranny of monarchy, which was, in his view, everywhere an obstacle to progress, hope, decency, and truth. His politics having been formed over the problem of liberty—to him in his certitude it was neither a question nor an issue—his friends and enemies followed therefrom. On his deathbed, he worried about the Bourbons regaining the throne of France.

The adolescent Hazlitt must have been a bit of a prig, moral-political division, so passionate, so full of politics was he, like those children who have been reading *The Nation* or *The New Republic* since the age of eleven and have all the answers at fourteen. In his forties, Hazlitt wrote to his son that it was "my misfortune perhaps to be bred up among Dissenters, who look with too jaundiced an eye at others and set too high a value on their own peculiar pretensions." The youthful Hazlitt was a perfect little red-hot Jacobin. But—a crucial but—he was not that alone. He was a boy whose imagination was fired by Bible stories, whose heart was stirred by *Tom Jones*, whose life was permanently altered at seeing Sarah Siddons play Lady Macbeth, whose timbers were shivered by reading Schiller's tragedy *The Robbers*. Even as a boy he was used to reasoning things out on his own. He had considerable powers of reflection, and would go off by himself and think things through. An opinion once taken on he seldom deserted.

What Hazlitt did desert, not long after his entrance at New College, was the notion of following his father into the Unitarian ministry. For one thing, the world at large had great allure for him. For another, though Hazlitt would always remain respectful of the religion of his father, he was too set in his own difficult ways ever to hope to find and keep a living as a minister. He must early have sensed the oddity of his own personality. The man who would one day be known as one of the great practitioners of the essay was not, for example, able to write assigned essays in school; writing was already too important for him to expend it upon trivial classroom work.

Hazlitt had a temperament problem, which did not allow him to be other than he was, and an integrity problem, which did not allow him to change himself for anyone. Normally, these might be considered happy problems. But they turned out to be both the making of him and the cause behind much of his difficulty in life. Sensing his faith and his reason in conflict, Hazlitt decided that, if he was not to live with contradiction in his own soul, he would have to forgo a career in the ministry, even if this would cause his father sadness. "You have done everything in your power to make your son a wise and useful man," the head of the New College at Hackney wrote to Hazlitt's father upon William's announcing his not wishing to become a minister, which meant his withdrawal from the school, "and may we not hope that he will be a wise and useful man in some other sphere of life? What that other sphere will be I cannot point out. . . ."

Neither for a good while could Hazlitt. He left school at seventeen. Dissenters were not then allowed admission to Oxford or Cambridge. For a painfully long spell he worked away—with excruciating slowness—on an ambitious essay that set out to prove that men were not inherently selfish. "For many years of my life I did nothing but think," he later wrote. "I had nothing else to do but solve some knotty point, or dip into some abstruse author, or look into the sky, or wander by the pebbled sea-side. . . ." As so often with Hazlitt, who was wont to find the bad in the good and the good in the bad, he also later wrote, referring to these years: "I can write fast enough now. Am I better than I was then? Oh no! One truth discovered, one pang of regret at not being

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

able to express it, is better than all the fluency and flippancy in the world."

He lived with his father or sometimes with his older brother John, a painter of miniatures. Owing to a family connection, he knew William Godwin, author of *Political Justice*, through whom he came to meet Coleridge, one of the decisive influences on his life. Working on his essay, which he titled "On the Disinterestedness of the Human Mind," he wrote to his father to report that he has "ventured to look at high things." He also let his father know that the work proceeded slowly, though he felt he wrote more easily than he once did. Around this time he discovered the prose of Edmund Burke, which he later allowed that he had tried half a dozen times, unsuccessfully, to describe, but which quite simply blew him away. Reading Rousseau, which he also did around this time, made for another Eureka moment in his life. Burke and Rousseau, two altogether contradictory figures, were further influences on Hazlitt.

The essay on the disinterestedness of the human mind, begun in 1796, was eventually published in 1805 under the title *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*. In between times, Hazlitt set out on a new career, that of portrait painter, which, after his early failures at religion and philosophy, was to prove his third false start. The landscape painter Philipp Hackert once told Goethe, when the poet showed an interest in painting, that "you have talent, but you are incompetent." Something of the reverse was true of Hazlitt, who was competent but, by his own high reckoning, without talent. Stanley Jones, in his excellent biography of Hazlitt, a measured work of genuine scholarship that serves well both its subject and its readers, remarks of Hazlitt's painting that in it he "never threw off the paralysis of imitation nor moved forward to the frontiers of originality that he later successfully crossed in his writing."[1] Hazlitt had several commissions to do portraits, but his perfectionism joined to his strong sense of his own inadequacy—Titian, Rembrandt, and above all Raphael were among his models—stood in the way of his completing many of them.

Although Hazlitt failed as a painter, his interest in painting made him all the better as a writer. It not only made him an impressive art critic—he was among the first to recognize the genius in the early paintings of Turner and splendid at describing all that went on in a painting—but it gave something akin to a painterly quality to his prose generally. ("A genuine criticism," he would later write, "should, as I take it, reflect the colours, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work.") Something similar might be said about the ultimate utility of his failure at philosophy. He would describe his own prose as endowed with the thought of a metaphysician and the tact of a painter. Of course, if one succeeds, as Hazlitt later did with his essays, then in retrospect it seems as if even one's starkest failures have contributed to that success.

Not everyone would agree about the degree of Hazlitt's success as an essayist. As a useful corrective to the all but locked-in reputation of Hazlitt as great essayist, one can scarcely do better than to read Leslie Stephen on Hazlitt. In a brilliant criticism in *Hours in a Library*, Stephen says straightaway that he thinks Hazlitt not capable of "the highest kind of excellence." He thinks him a man "whose personal and public sentiments [were] so invariably blended in his mind that neither he nor anybody else could have analyzed their composition." He thinks Hazlitt a man wrapped within multiple masks of "cunning egotism," and that it does not in any way redound to his credit that all his life he held to the same views: "A man whose opinions at fifty are his opinions at fourteen has opinions of very little value," he writes. (Hazlitt had claimed that "a person who forgets all the sentiments and principles to which he was most attached at nineteen can have no sentiments ever after worth being attached to.") His politics, moreover, "were simply the expression, in a generalized form, of his intense

1 *Hazlitt: A Life*, by Stanley Jones; Oxford University Press, 424 pages, $84; $22 paper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

feeling of personality." He was "no genuine democrat," for no party was good enough for him, and, writes Stephen, "he hates 'both mobs,' or in other words, the great mass of the human race." ("Mankind are a herd of knaves and fools," Hazlitt wrote. "It is necessary to join the crowd, or get out of their way, in order not to be trampled to death by them.") Everything that Leslie Stephen says is dead-on, devastatingly true, but, somehow, it isn't quite the whole truth.

Precocious and yet a slow starter, Hazlitt dabbled and dithered. He spent four months in Paris, copying the great masters in the Louvre. He wrote a grammar, did abridgments, edited and completed the memoirs of Thomas Holcroft, published an attack on Malthus's theory of population, continued to take on commissions for portraits, and functioned as something of an odd-jobs man in the arts. But he didn't really get underway until financial pressure had set in in earnest, and once it had it never left him. Henceforth, writes Catherine Macdonald Maclean, one of Hazlitt's earlier biographers, "never in all his life . . . even on his deathbed, was he to know respite from financial anxiety and literary labour."

It was his marriage, in 1808 (when he was thirty), and the subsequent birth of two sons—one of whom died in infancy—that forced Hazlitt to strap on the harness of more regular employment. As Leslie Stephen rightly put it, Hazlitt, in his thirties, with a wife and son, "at last discovered the great secret of the literary profession, that a clever man can write when he has to write or starve." Not his marriage but the need to support it by steady literary production was the making of William Hazlitt, who, given his dreaminess, his penchant for brooding at great length over subjects, his perfectionism, might have ended an obscure footnote in literary history: a sometimes sullen chap who used from time to time to show up at Charles and Mary Lamb's "Wednesdays" and occasionally explode into passionate utterance over politics.

As for Hazlitt's marriage—it was the first of two—it is part of his history with women, and a grievously sad history that is. William Hazlitt, to put it very gently, had a woman problem and an especial talent for looking to the wrong women to solve it. His friend P. G. Patmore said that he never knew Hazlitt when he wasn't in love; and part of the difficulty here is that he seems never to have been in love with the women he married. "A cynic," wrote Paul Elmer More, "might point a moral from the fact that the only events of Hazlitt's life which were utterly free from the intrusion of passion were his two ventures into matrimony." Hazlitt's taste in women, but not in wives, ran to country girls or chambermaids—"humble beauties," as he referred to them—in any event, to women well below him in intellectual sophistication. Poor, foolish man, he wanted both to idealize women and to make them over; his *Liber Amoris*, which caused such a scandal in its day and seems so pathetic in ours, carries the subtitle of "The New Pygmalion." Much the largest portion of "On the Conduct of Life; or Advice to a School-Boy," Hazlitt's essay in the form of a letter to his son, is about women, and all of it is cautionary, ending with his telling the boy that "Love turned away his face from me." He meant it did so his lifelong.

In his diary, Henry Crabb Robinson claimed that, "like other gross sensualists, [Hazlitt] had a horror of the society of ladies, especially of smart and handsome and modest young women." A gross sensualist seems off the mark. Any consideration of Hazlitt's tortured relations with women has to go back to what is known as the incident at Keswick. This incident—misadventure? contretemps?—took place in the Lake District in 1803, when Hazlitt was twenty-five and an itinerant portrait painter. Nobody knows precisely what happened, but the best guess is that Hazlitt made advances to a village girl who not only repulsed his advances but set the village toughs on him, so that Hazlitt was fortunate to escape with his life. "The minx made a fool of him," Stanley Jones economically puts it, "and the episode

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ended in ludicrous catastrophe and ignominious flight."

No further mention need have been made of it, except that Wordsworth, in response to Hazlitt's review of the *Excursion* in later years, loosed the story, with colorful details added, in the long-standing method of going after the character of the critic when you can't bear the criticism. With the Keswick story as ammunition, Wordsworth tried to ruin Hazlitt's friendship with Charles Lamb, Henry Crabb Robinson, and others. More devastatingly, however, it was later used by Hazlitt's quite unscrupulous enemies on *Blackwood's Magazine*, where, in painting him as a brute out of control, the story was used as political propaganda against him. (These same enemies claimed Hazlitt was a drunk and referred, famously in that day, to "pimpled Hazlitt," though Hazlitt was apparently not more than a regular drinker in a hard-drinking age and had a clear complexion.) Wordsworth must have first heard the story of the incident at Keswick from Coleridge, who later claimed that Hazlitt, on the run, came to him, and that he gave him "all the money I had in the world, and the very shoes off my feet to escape over the mountains." That detail about the shoes off his feet makes one wonder what Coleridge was smoking the day he retold it.

The relationship between Hazlitt and Coleridge is a story in itself, and one that scholars of romanticism are apparently not yet agreed upon. Thomas McFarland, for example, in *Romantic Cruxes*, thinks the relationship central: he flicks a wet noodle at David Bromwich, who, in his book *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (1983), seeks to minimize its importance. One thing is clear, and this is that Hazlitt returned again and again to the subject of Coleridge, and in his work would cross a crowded street to spit on his shoes. In his essay "On Depth and Superficiality," for example, Hazlitt refers to Coleridge as "a great but useless thinker." In "On the Prose Style of Poets," he claims Coleridge's prose "swelling and turgid—everlastingly aiming to be greater than his subject; filling his fancy with fumes and vapours in the pangs and throes of miraculous parturition, and bringing forth only *still-births*." But in his *Lectures on the English Poets*, Hazlitt says that Coleridge is "the only person I ever knew who answered to the idea of a man of genius," adding that "his thoughts did not seem to come with labour and effort; but as if borne on the gusts of genius, and as if the wings of his imagination lifted him from off his feet."

Hazlitt's most impressive portrait of Coleridge appears in his essay—one of his very best—"My First Acquaintance with Poets." This essay was written in 1823, long after the two men, Hazlitt and Coleridge, had complicated their relationship to the point of alienation, and it is a tribute to the generosity in Hazlitt that he recalls with such large-hearted fidelity how impressed he initially was by Coleridge and how important he once was to him. Hazlitt was not yet twenty, Coleridge twenty-six upon their first meeting, and the occasion was a sermon Coleridge was to deliver at a Unitarian church in Shrewsbury, ten miles' distance from Wem. Hazlitt made the trek on muddy roads in January to hear him, for Coleridge was already a celebrated figure. Coleridge launched into his sermon "like an eagle dallying with the wind." Listening to him, Hazlitt heard "the music of the spheres. Poetry and Philosophy had met together." And in one of those passionate, slit-your-own-gut-open sentences, sometimes telling you rather more than you wish to know, Hazlitt, early in the essay, acknowledges his intellectual debt to Coleridge:

> My soul has indeed remained in its original bondage, dark, obscure, with longings infinite and unsatisfied; my heart, shut up in the prison-house of this rude clay, has never found, nor will it ever find, a heart to speak to; but that my understanding also did not remain dumb and brutish, or at length found a language to express itself, I owe to Coleridge.

In *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt takes the machine gun to Coleridge, leaving an intel-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lectual corpse riddled with holes. The theme of this essay is how Coleridge blew everything by talking away his gifts. "If Mr. Coleridge had not been the most impressive talker of his age, he would probably have been the finest writer; but he lays down his pen to make sure of an auditor, and mortgages the admiration of posterity for the stare of an idler." Hazlitt notes the tangential quality of Coleridge's mind, its dilatoriness and digressiveness. As a prose writer, Coleridge's mind was the scene of a bloody battlefield in which prolixity often battled obscurity to a dead draw. Or, as Hazlitt puts it in a single shot that plunks three balls into the pocket: "If our author's poetry is inferior to his conversation, his prose is utterly abortive." Yet in his *Lectures on the English Poets*, published seven years earlier, Hazlitt notes of Coleridge that "he is the only person from whom I ever learnt anything." He then adds: "There is one thing he could learn from me in return, but *that* he has not."

Hazlitt does not say what that "one thing" is, but a reasonable guess would be that what Coleridge could have learned from him was political constancy. Everything that Hazlitt says about Coleridge is true enough, but behind it, even so, was the feeling of betrayal that he felt against Coleridge and the Lake Poets—Wordsworth and Southey chief among them. To put it in one unkind, very modern, hyphenated word that he himself does not use, Hazlitt thought that they were "sell-outs." Hazlitt was above party politics, was not a Whig and certainly not a Tory, but he did think himself a member of the party of liberty ("of all the loose Terms in the world," wrote Edmund Burke, "Liberty is the most indefinite"), and it was this party that the Lake Poets had, in Hazlitt's mind, deserted.

Hazlitt, as Professor Jones remarks, "took public events hard," and none harder than those connected with France and that nation's revolution. It won't do to press the analogy too hard, but in several respects Hazlitt was to the French Revolution what many modern intellectuals—they still walk the streets—have been to the Russian Revolution. Unlike these contemporary counterparts, Hazlitt did not attempt to cover up revolutionary bloodshed, though he did sometimes justify it. Where opinions on the French Revolution are divided, Hazlitt is never quite to be trusted. He allows for Wordsworth's originality and power, but you sense him pulling back from a larger appreciation of him because Wordsworth later concluded that there might just have been other dawns when it was perhaps even more blissful to be alive and more heavenly to be young than that of the dawn of the French Revolution. Hazlitt will allow that Southey's "prose-style can scarcely be too much praised," add that "he is steady in his attachments, and is a man, in many particulars admirable, and in all respectable," but cannot forbear closing: "his political inconsistency alone excepted." Over the subject of Napoleon, Hazlitt was able to get into a fight with Charles Lamb for Lamb's political indifference, which, given the latter's famous good nature, apparently wasn't an easy thing to do.

William Hazlitt was in that category of persons who, in order to like them, one has *really* to like them. I happen to be in the category of persons who *really* like Hazlitt, but one has to admit that he must have been a very great trial to his friends and a delight to his enemies in the large exposed target he gave them. Geoffrey Keynes, his bibliographer, has remarked that no one who reads Hazlitt remains neutral about him. Virginia Woolf wrote that "no man could read him and maintain a simple and uncompounded idea of him." In "On Depth and Superficiality," Hazlitt wrote of himself:

> I am not, in the ordinary acceptation of the term, a *good-natured man*; that is, many things annoy me besides what interferes with my own ease and interest. I hate a lie; a piece of injustice wounds me to the quick, though nothing but the report of it reach me. Therefore I have made many enemies and few friends; for the public know nothing of well-wishers, and keep a wary eye on those that would reform them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That is fair enough, even if a bit self-glorifying, but Hazlitt, being Hazlitt, cannot of course let it go at that, and so must close the passage by zinging Coleridge, who "used to complain of my irascibility in this respect, and not without reason. Would that he had possessed a little of my tenaciousness and jealousy of temper; and then, with his eloquence to paint the wrong, and acuteness to detect it, his country and the cause of liberty might not have fallen without a struggle." His loyal friend Lamb said of Hazlitt: "I wish he would not quarrel with the world at the rate he does; but the reconciliation must be effected by himself, and I despair of living to see that day." Nor would he.

But in order to admire Hazlitt you don't even have to like him. His talent, which was doubtless inseparable from his crotchets, his intellectual aggression, his thorny nature, simply commands admiration. "The virtue of his work," wrote Paul Elmer More, "lies not in his analytic criticism, which can be studied apart from his own language, but in the fusion of passion and insight." That is precisely wherein Hazlitt's power lay. In most writing, passion brings opacity and obscurity in its wake; the angrier one becomes the cloudier and more muddled one's thought. With Hazlitt passion in argument seemed to result in even greater penetration. He was easily the greatest polemicist of his own highly polemical age, and perhaps one of the greatest polemicists in all of intellectual history.

Professor Jones makes the useful point that Hazlitt's polemical exchanges were more than mere argument against enemies, and they would be of no interest if they were. ("Nothing," as Cyril Connolly once rightly put it, "ages like hate.") Instead they were a mode of thought that in his hands turned argument into literature. Professor Jones writes:

> All such exchanges are evidence of [Hazlitt's] disinclination to pontificate, of his dislike of the egotistical; his views are commonly defined dramatically, on specific occasions, by opposition to those of others. Ultimately grounded in principle, they are immediately polemical; they manifest his leaning towards the marriage of the general and the particular, of the abstract and the concrete, of the universal and the individual. He saw the clash of argument as a means of escaping from self-communion into the dramatic and so of acceding to universality, a means of liberation from the sterility of the immured self.

The Hazlitt of the fiery polemics, of the impassioned art criticism, of the jaunty writing about the theater, the literary critic, the familiar essayist, and the writer who finally belonged to literature had first to serve his apprenticeship in daily journalism. This he began in 1812, at the age of thirty-four, covering the House of Commons for the *Morning Chronicle*, for which he received his first steady income, four guineas a week. His own obvious talent soon freed him from the gallery of the House of Commons and the tedium of reporting the empty utterances of politicians, and he was set to writing drama criticism, which he did surpassingly well. Presently he was writing on other subjects—art, literature, politics—and his writing began to appear in other papers, including Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and *The Times*. Fearless, confident, knowing his own views and not much concerned with the views of others, except to topple them, he was among the first critics to recognize and support the genius of Turner in painting, Edmund Kean in acting, Keats in poetry.

Hazlitt's earlier prose was that of a toy philosopher, stiff, slow, awkward, the writing of a student imitating quite well but nonetheless still imitating a metaphysician. But now he realized that, if he were to make his way as a journalist, he would have to write as a man writing to men; he sought to achieve what, in his essay "On the Prose Style of Poets," he called the "genuine master-spirit of the prose-writer," which was "the tone of lively sensible conversation." He later told the painter James Northcote that, when he began to write for the newspapers, he "had not till then been in the habit of writing at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all, or had been a long time about it; but I perceived that with the necessity, the fluency came. Something I did, *took*; and I was called upon to do a number of things all at once. I was in the middle of the stream, and must sink or swim." He swam, as we now know, not merely well but like an Olympian.

Hazlitt's essays have immense flow. He once compared Edmund Burke's prose to a diamond. "It has always appeared to me that the most perfect prose-style, the most powerful, the most dazzling, the most daring, that which went the nearest to the verge of poetry, and yet never fell over, was Burke's." If Burke's prose was comparable to a diamond, Hazlitt's own prose most closely resembles a cascade, a waterfall, a body of beautiful white water, a rapids. One has to attend closely to all that he says, as one does to every stretch of white water, for crags, tree limbs, and odd debris float past. Surprises are contained in the codas of sentences, as for example in the following from the paragraphs on the poet Tim Moore in *The Spirit of the Age*: "Or modern poetry in its retrograde progress comes at last to be constructed on the principle of the modern opera, where an attempt is made to gratify every sense at every instant, and where the understanding alone is insulted and the heart mocked." Formulations come fast and furious: "the want of passion is but another name for the want of sympathy and imagination"; "mere good-nature (or what passes in the world for such) is often no better than indolent selfishness"; "the principle of life and motion is, after all, the primary condition of genius"; and "there is nothing so tormenting as the affectation of ease and freedom from affectation." As for invective, he could serve it up, vast quantities of it, at typhoon intensity. Of William Gifford, he wrote:

> Mr. Gifford was originally bred to some handicraft. He afterwards contrived to learn Latin, and was for some time an usher in a school, till he became a tutor in a nobleman's family. The low-bred, self-taught man, the pedant, and the dependent on the great, contribute to form the Editor of the *Quarterly Review*. He is admirably qualified for this situation, which he has held for some years, by a happy combination of defects, natural and acquired; and in the event of his death it will be difficult to provide him a suitable successor.

"I think what I feel," Hazlitt noted in the preface to his *View of the English Stage*; "I say what I think." Many people say what they think they feel, but to say it just so is the trick. "To write a genuine familiar or truly English style," Hazlitt wrote in "On Familiar Style," "is to write as any one would speak in common conversation, who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes." This Hazlitt could do, consummately.

Still, he was better at the sentence than at the paragraph, and better at the paragraph than at the complete composition. Much in Hazlitt is unshapely; many of his essays —even his superior ones—end up in the air, which is to say arbitrarily, unsatisfactorily, badly. In explanation, if not extenuation, of this, it is well to remember that Hazlitt turned out his prose at a fierce rate. At one point he went off to his country cottage at Winterslow where in a month's time he wrote nine full essays. One is inclined to wonder what he might have done had he worked more slowly. But then one is brought up by the recollection of Karl Kraus's withering aphorism about a journalist being someone who, given time, writes worse.

It was a point of pride with Hazlitt, as it ought to be with any writer capable of honestly saying as much, that "I never wrote a line that licked the dust." At the same time, he did not mind kicking a goodly amount of dust over his friends. Hazlitt was eager to write for the *Edinburgh Review*, for example; that magazine paid him well, and its editor, Francis Jeffrey, on more than one occasion proved his friend by bailing him out of financial difficulty and on others did a good bit in his service by cleaning up his prose for publication. But Hazlitt did not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

see this as in any way debarring him from writing the following in *The Spirit of the Age*:

> The faults of the *Edinburgh Review* arise out of the very consciousness of critical and logical power. In political questions it relies too little on the broad basis of liberty and humanity, enters too much into mere dry formalities, deals too often in *moot-points*, and descends too readily to a sort of special-pleading in defence of *home* truths and natural feelings. In matters of taste and criticism, its tone is sometimes apt to be supercilious and *cavalier* from its habitual faculty of analysing defects and beauties according to given principles, from its quickness in deciding, from its facility in illustrating its views. In this latter department it has been guilty of some capital oversights.

Which Hazlitt doesn't in the least mind going on to point out and elaborate upon.

For a powerfully intelligent man Hazlitt had a powerfully high quotient of naïveté. He did not so much overrate the truth as he overrated its powers of persuasion. It is so that the truth will set you free, but you ought to know that, enunciated tactlessly enough, it is likely to leave you no shortage of enemies to have to deal with in your freedom. "All the former part of my life I was treated as a cipher," Hazlitt wrote when he began to be well known, "and since I have got into notice, I have been set upon as a wild beast." He was accused of dishonesty, of writing ungrammatically, of being brutish with women. It was his politics, with his take-no-hostages polemical style, that set the wolves on his trail. Professor Jones puts the case well: "The reputation he gained by his criticism was constantly jeopardized by the enmity stirred up by his political writings, and it was owing to these that he was pursued with abuse for the rest of his life, and abandoned to disparagement and neglect after his death."

That Hazlitt was so harassed by enemies makes all the stranger his decision to publish, in 1823, *Liber Amoris*, his account of his dreary love affair with Sarah Walker, one of the daughters of the tailor in whose home he, Hazlitt, took lodgings in London after he and his wife had separated (though not yet divorced). Hazlitt's love affair with Sarah Walker was his mid-life *Human Bondage*, played without a clubfoot but, in reading Hazlitt's own pathetic account of it, with something one is inclined to view as close to a clubhead. Sarah Walker was nineteen, Hazlitt forty-two, when, in 1820, they first met. She brought him his morning tea, and allowed him to caress her before she set out on her other morning rounds. "I cannot describe the weakness of mind to which she has reduced me," he wrote, in a letter that appears in the thinly fictionalized account provided in *Liber Amoris*. But he was wrong; the book does describe, all too clearly, how stupefied he became.

Many are the views of Hazlitt's sad unconsummated love for Sarah Walker. The best face put upon it is perhaps that drawn by Professor Gerald Lahey, the editor of a scholarly edition of *Liber Amoris*,[2] who sees in it "a parable of the entire Romantic period trying to come to terms with its flawed visionary conception of reality." Yet one wonders if this isn't what the English used to call over-egging the pudding. What Hazlitt seems to have done is vastly overrate a not very attractive young woman from the workaday lower-middle class. The painter Benjamin Haydon nicely caught Hazlitt's situation: "the girl really excited in him a pure, devoted and intense love. His imagination clothed her with that virtue which her affected modesty induced him to believe in, and he is really in love with an ideal perfection, which has no existence but in his own mind." Hazlitt told the young woman he would divorce his wife for her; and in fact he did, striking the modern literary note in being perhaps the first famous writer to be under the gun for alimony and child support.

2 *Liber Amoris, or, The Modern Pygmalion*, edited, with an introduction and notes, by Gerald Lahey (New York University Press, 1980).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hazlitt seems to have told everybody he saw about his infatuation with and ill-treatment at the hands of this young woman, including his eleven-year-old son. In fact, she didn't especially treat him ill, unless one is ready to call ill-treatment her refusal to go along with his fantasies about her. She was quite correct, when he asked her to come live with him, to tell him "that it would be no use if I did [for] you would always be hankering after what could never be." She was rightly put off with his talking so much about her not only to friends but to her own family. At one point he went so far as to assign another man the task of attempting to seduce Sarah in order to test her moral standards. (She passed.) In short, Hazlitt made a pest, a jerk, a royal fool of himself.

One thing to make a fool of yourself, another to publish an account of your foolishness, which Hazlitt did in *Liber Amoris*. Why did he do it? Some contend that he needed to do so to burn Sarah Walker out of his system; some that it took great courage for him to do so; some that, having done so, proved Hazlitt no gentleman, which, when it came to women, it is probably fair to say that he wasn't, having, in this realm, only three settings on his emotional dial: worshipful, vengeful, and indifferent. My own guess is that he probably did so because he was the pure type of the writer, as we have come to know it in our day, who cannot let anything like a serious experience go unwritten about.

Liber Amoris, despite occasional touching passages, does not have any real standing as literature. What is of interest about it is that for its time it marks a new candor in confession—and a very modern candor in its unpleasantness, its lack of interest in redemption, and, one must add, its self-deception. Hazlitt knows that he has made a fool of himself, but blames this alternately on the guile of Sarah Walker, on the overwhelming power of love, on everyone and everything but himself. *Liber Amoris* feels very much a predecessor of the Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath school of sloppy confession without remorse that has had a strong run in recent decades.

Was Hazlitt, in *Liber Amoris*, attempting to emulate Montaigne, whose "inexpressible frankness and sincerity, as well as power" he much admired, Montaigne in whom there "is no attempt at imposition or concealment, no juggling tricks or solemn mouthing, no laboured attempts at proving himself always in the right, and every body else in the wrong"? If so, he made a rum job of it. This most gifted of English essayists, persistent student of human nature though he wished to be, seems to have had little talent for introspection. He was nearly always in battle, always agitated, always angry, a paranoid who made his own real enemies. He was too much the moralizer and too little the moralist. Montaigne looked to himself to understand the world. Hazlitt looked at the world in puzzlement over why it did not understand him. Not quite the same thing.

Yet the pathetic affair with Sarah Walker seems to have increased Hazlitt's strength as a writer. When he published *Characteristics, In the Manner of Rochefoucauld's Maxims* in 1823, the year after his affair with Sarah Walker, he noted that the only point on which he dared to claim comparison with the French master was that neither of them had a theory to maintain. But, in fact, after the events recounted in *Liber Amoris* Hazlitt's essays took on a greater richness owing to an implicit theory. This had to do with his renewed appreciation of the mixed qualities of motives in life, of the element of irrationality often in even the most mundane of human affairs. In his essay "The Main-Chance," he set out to show how small a part reason plays in life next to parts played by passion and sheer human oddity. In "My First Acquaintance with Poets," he remarks upon the exhaustion of enjoyment and hope as one grows older: "As we taste the pleasures of life, their spirit evaporates, the sense palls; and nothing is left but the phantoms, the lifeless shadows of what *has been*!" Hazlitt suffered but not for nothing.

Although he claimed that Sarah Walker was "my life" and that "it is gone from me, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I am grown spectral," he still had expenses to meet, his writing was much in demand by newspapers and magazines, his political passions were undimmed, he had his son's future to think about, he wished to see the Louvre again and Italy for the first time. He even remarried, unsuccessfully, and in the last years of his life set out on a mammoth biography of Napoleon, his hero of heroes, a work of justification which he had hoped would be his own greatest literary monument. (When Napoleon went down at Waterloo, Hazlitt took the defeat personally. "He seemed prostrated in mind and body," Benjamin Haydon wrote, "he walked about unwashed, unshaved, hardly sober by day and always intoxicated by night, literally, without exaggeration, for weeks; until at length, wakening as it were from a stupor, he at once left off all stimulating liquors, and never touched them after.") He wrote the brilliant pieces that make up *The Spirit of the Age* in 1825, but melancholy suffuses his later familiar essays. "I turn back from the world that has deceived me," he wrote in "A Farewell to Essay-Writing," "to nature that has lent it a false beauty, and that keeps up the illusions of the past." In this same essay he remarks upon our indifference to that which is worthy in life, caught up as we are in "the present vexation, the future disappointment."

Hazlitt had a sufficiency of his own present vexations and future disappointments: the many attacks on him (William Gifford's *Quarterly* claimed his essays oozed a trail of "slime and filth"); the sadness of his relations with women; the endless broken friendships; the dismantling of the French Revolution and the defeat of Napoleon —nothing, it must have seemed to him, worked out. All that was left to him was pride in his integrity and the surprising number of his books (when young he "had no suspicion that I should ever become a voluminous writer"). He once said that he took pleasure in life only from paintings, books, and nature. Notably absent from this list is people. Referring to the writer in general but to himself more pertinently, he wrote that "the coldness and jealousy of his friends not unfrequently keep pace with the rancour of his enemies."

Not long before he died—of stomach cancer, in September of 1830—this almost instinctively disputatious man asked only three things of life before he departed it: that he die with someone he loved beside him, that he have some evidence of hope for mankind of the sort that the French Revolution gave him when young, and that he leave "some sterling work" behind him. Only the latter, as we now know, came about. Still this often disagreeable man, whose truculent personality rendered him lonely most of his days, can never be removed from the small but courageous company of those writers who knew not how to lie or to fudge, but could only convey the complicated truths they found in their own troubled hearts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Crime and punishment

by Leszek Kolakowski

I recognize that the title of this essay is not strikingly original; nor is the topic. I should say at the outset, therefore, that this is not an essay about Dostoevsky, or even about legal theory—an area about which I am largely ignorant. It is rather about the traditional question of whether punishment can be justified, if at all, on other than practical grounds—and whether the practical, or instrumental, justification suffices.

Familiar justifications for punishment include the idea that the punishment is a *deterrent* for others; that it is a *preventive means* that makes the criminal physically incapable, temporarily or permanently, of committing further crimes; that it is an instrument of *re-education*; and that it is an act of *retribution*. One also finds some combination of the above. In the first three cases, the justification for punishment is practical; only in the case of retribution is it moral.

None of the practical reasons offered for punishment, it seems, requires the notion of responsibility, at least if this notion implies freedom of choice. One may always argue, as did Spinoza, that such a notion is irrelevant: Don't we kill poisonous snakes without asking whether they enjoy *liberum arbitrium*, or even being certain that they do not? Don't we remove from a road the stone that impairs our movements? On this view, punishing criminals does not differ from these sorts of practical measures.

The obvious trouble with this simple explanation is that we normally believe that people *do* differ significantly from snakes and stones. We believe that people are able to make choices, that there is a distinction between instinctive reflexes or mechanical movements and specifically human behavior mediated by reflection, and that our thinking about crime and punishment naturally involves the ideas of justice, responsibility, and duty.

Of course, a consistent behaviorist can easily dismiss such doubts. Maintaining that the concepts of justice, responsibility, and duty are no more than philosophical figments or remnants of religious superstitions, the behaviorist holds that we would be much better off scrapping such concepts altogether (though it is not clear how he knows that we would be better off). According to him, our behavior—whether or not it is mediated by reflection—consists of events determined entirely by prior conditions (again, it is not clear how the behaviorist knows this). Consequently, he regards punishment merely as a technique for modifying human conduct: for him, punishment needs no other support. Whether it does or doesn't need additional support is the question I wish to address.

That no human society could survive without deterring its members from what it considers anti-social behavior is obvious. At least in our time, whenever legal restrictions become for any reason unenforceable, the result almost invariably is mass looting and vandalism. And this is true not only in So-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

malia or Liberia but in New York as well, as one saw after the sudden blackout there a few years ago. Not all people go wild on such occasions, to be sure, but an anarchical minority suffices to break society apart and make life impossible. If my heart is rather on the side of anarchism, my reason is not, and I have to admit that anarchism is a childish dream, alas. No doubt there are encouraging counterexamples. Solzhenitsyn tells a story about a Soviet concentration camp in which the inmates overpowered the guards and took power for about three days. On that occasion, miraculously, the camp remained in order: there was no violence and no rape, even though the population consisted mainly of hardened criminals. The suddenly regained feeling of freedom created the fraternity. Such examples cannot, unfortunately, be extrapolated into a general principle. We have to admit that no human community, unless it wants to disintegrate, can dispense with the institutions that frighten off would-be criminals with the prospect of suffering.

But the idea of deterrence is not above criticism. It has been often noted that there is something wrong with inflicting suffering on some people in order to terrify others. Doesn't it run counter to the Kantian principle demanding that we treat every human being as an end in himself, never as a means? What right do we have to employ people as instruments of deterrence? Moreover, the very idea of deterrence suggests that its validity is to be measured by its effectiveness. The simplest example: In all debates about capital punishment, its opponents argue that it is useless because it does not deter terrorists or murderers; it is said that statistics do not reveal any clear connection between the abolition or re-imposition of the death penalty and the respective increase or decline in the number of relevant crimes. Perhaps. But surely the death penalty *would* work as a deterrent if it were applied swiftly and infallibly—preferably amidst horrid tortures in a public square—to people who ride city buses without a ticket or fail to fasten their seat belts when driving a car.

A silly joke? Not necessarily, if we wish to measure the validity of punishment solely by its efficacy as a deterrent. Everybody would say, of course, that my suggestion involves a glaring disproportion between the offense and the punishment. But how do we know what is or is not proportionate in such matters? In various historical periods, people were hanged for stealing a few shillings, buried alive for adultery, and burned for not believing in the Holy Trinity. The present penal system in Western civilization is of relatively recent origin and has by no means acquired universal recognition or approval. What penalty is proper for what wrongdoing is a matter of changing conventions, feelings, and sensitivities—as is, for that matter, the scope of acts that are penalized. In those countries where no strict penal code is in existence, we still observe a wild discrepancy between penalties meted out for the same crime, depending upon the opinion of a judge. There is no *a priori* and no empirical foundation, no transcendental wisdom and no religious tradition, on which we could rely in establishing the right proportions between various criminal acts and various ways in which they are punished. In those matters, justice is always arbitrary and there is usually no way by which the crime and penalty could be reduced to the same currency.

The idea of punishment as a preventive is not liable to the objection that it views individuals merely as a means to instill dread into other people. On the one hand, it seems even better to justify the ultimate prevention, that is, the death penalty. On the other hand, in those cases in which there is practically no probability that the criminal might commit the same crime again—and such cases are frequent—it suggests that there is no need for punishment at all. As to the question of proportion between punishable acts and the punishment, the idea of prevention does not seem to provide us with any better clues than does the idea of punishment as a deterrence: here, too, the matter is bound to be decided by historically relative consensus.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The concept of re-education as a theoretical foundation of the penal system provokes other doubts. Whether and how punishment educates criminals is a matter of empirical inquiry, and I am not competent to venture into this area; it is enough to say that, according to the considered opinion of many knowledgeable people, prisons are more likely to provide an education for crime than for decency; and if this is the case, the idea of re-education as a justification for punishment is simply pointless. Setting this empirical question aside, however, we should ask what is meant by re-education. If it consists in instilling fear, in altering a person's conditional reflexes so as to dispose him to change his conduct in the future, it does not seem to differ fundamentally from deterrence in acting on the criminal himself, rather than on other people. If moral education in the proper sense is meant, then it would seem that punishment is altogether dispensable if other means—for instance, ordering people to attend classes in moral philosophy instead of sending them to prison—prove to be more efficient (unless, of course, attending such classes is in itself a penalty heavy enough).

But even if we grant the uncontestable assumption that it is impossible to dispense with the instruments of deterrence lest the whole fabric of the society fall apart, there is still another question: Can the idea of deterrence and, in general, practical justifications of punishment suffice to ensure a level of community without which life becomes intolerable? In other words: Do we need the idea of retribution?

The concept of retribution seems to be close enough to that of revenge to provoke understandable suspicion. The two concepts can be separated, though. Revenge is neither a punishment in the legal sense nor a retribution in the sense of natural law. It is an emotionally motivated act that aims exclusively at doing harm to people who, in our opinion, did harm to us directly or indirectly; the intensity of the thirst for revenge has little to do with the extent of harm caused by the person involved, as we can see from many cases of people killing each other for ridiculously slight reasons. The desire for revenge is perhaps natural and unavoidable, but a widely spread moral intuition recommends that we forbear from actually taking revenge, even in cases of an obvious and serious wrongdoing, as this would imply that we are at the same time plaintiff, judge, prosecutor, and executioner in the conflict: a state of affairs that runs counter to the very concept of law. It is true that vengeful feelings often make up the background of public pressure exerted on penal legislation. Indeed, we all know of crimes so hideous, so abominable, that the demand for the death penalty is understandable. In countries where the death penalty has been abrogated, this generally came about through a legislative decision against the opinion of the majority of the population. The same can be said of the abolition of witch-hunting.

While we can, and probably ought to, dismiss the idea that vengeance is a compelling justification of any penal system, we may still wish to retain the idea of retribution and argue that it is important to keep it. Retribution is neither revenge nor is it necessary as a concept of the positive law. It is not a revenge because it does not imply an emotional urge to hurt the wrongdoer; it is not a part of the positive law because it cannot be properly defined in legal terms. The idea of retribution can retain its validity even if it were proved—and this is an empirical issue—that punishment is inefficient as a deterrent, as a preventive measure, or as an educational device. It is a moral—as opposed to practical—justification of punishment. To be sure, it can define the proportion between the character of a crime and the extent of penalty as little as practical reasons can do. One may say nonetheless that, without it, human communal life would be void of substance and would probably collapse.

The idea of retribution is, I believe, of mythological origin. We cannot *prove* its validity empirically or give it an *a priori*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ground. Yet it seems to be a widespread mythological belief—perhaps more often implied than stated in so many words—that there is at work a kind of moral mechanism of equilibrium in the arrangement of the cosmos such that evil has to be repaid, or canceled, by suffering; and that therefore suffering has a redeeming power, that it restores the order of Being, which is disturbed or upset continually by our evil acts. Suffering thus has a meaning that cannot be reduced to its hypothetical functions in legal machinery: it has its place in our life as participants in a cosmic order of things and in mankind's moral order—an order that was not arbitrarily invented by us but was found there, ready-made, sacred, compellingly imposed on human communities.

In the legal order, crime is what is defined as such by penal law. The scope of what is considered criminal may change one way or the other; some items are decriminalized, others are added to the list of punishable actions. Legal punishment is for transgressions of law, retribution is for sin, and sin is a part of a moral order of the universe. The ideas of sin, of evil, of guilt, of repentance, are beyond the scope of the legal system; the law can well function without them; but can mankind? In terms of secular constitutions, our only duty is not to violate the laws set by the state. Duty in the moral sense has little to do with positive legislation: We have duties that no positive law can prescribe and, on some occasions, we might have a duty to defy or to violate the existing laws.

In secular states within a nominally Christian civilization, the areas of sin as defined by church doctrine and of crime as defined by the law overlap. Some criminal acts, such as murder, rape, and stealing, are sinful in a religious sense, but some sins are not criminal. Lying, for instance, is a crime only on special occasions, like perjury, but Christian doctrine teaches that all lies are sinful. On the other hand, some acts forbidden by law may be considered *adiaphora*, or indifferent, by religious rules. Certainly, any Christian church is in an ambiguous position: It is supposed to convey to the faithful the divine commandments, but it is a legally ordered institution as well, and it would be impossible to claim that everything in the canon law or in the commandments of the Catholic Church is *de iure divino*. Therefore the area of what is defined as sinful is not immutable: One no longer needs to confess to a priest the sin of eating meat on Friday, and even though a married priest is still a sinner, exceptions are permissible and nobody maintains that the celibacy of priests is *de iure divino*. The use of contraceptives is in principle still a sin but probably so few Catholics bother about it nowadays that it is practically, albeit grudgingly, tolerated, not unlike premarital sex.

Having thus admitted that sin cannot be defined in formal terms of the actually binding ecclesiastical rules and that the Church as a legal order—as distinct from the Church as *corpus mysticum*—cannot pass for the infallible source of what the sin is, we may still believe that the evil is reality. That is, we may still believe that evil is a real characteristic of life and that we carry in us a kind of moral intuition that enables us to recognize it as such. We intuitively know, or at least we are capable of knowing, when we do evil and when our fellow men do it, whether or not this evil is defined as a crime in penal legislation.

The question of the *desirable* relationship between sin and crime has been the crucial area of conflict between theocracy and liberalism in modern civilization. The theocratic tendency in its strongest form—which is hardly noticeable in the history of the Christian West—consists in the demand for a direct rule of the state by the Church and the clergy. A weaker version, while accepting the distinction between secular and spiritual powers, wants everything that is sinful in terms of the Church's moral doctrine to be punishable by secular law—as was often the case in medieval civilization and later—apart from sins that for technical reasons simply cannot be punished because the law would be unenforceable (for instance, mental sins). If this tendency pre-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vailed, such sins as adultery and homosexuality would be illegal, not to speak of atheism and heresy. It took a very long time before such sins were decriminalized; homosexuality was punished in Britain until quite recently, and it is still illegal in some American states, no matter to what extent those laws are effectively enforced (and I am talking about Western civilization, and not about the Islamic states where the theocratic tendency has always been much stronger). Orthodox Jews would like to impose the Old Testament law on the state of Israel, including the interdiction of the sale of forbidden food, the interdiction of travel on the Sabbath, etc.

The liberal tendency refuses to abide by religious doctrine in defining the limits of the forbidden and the permissible, and defends the principle of the separation of the church from the state. Yet it still has to answer the question: What are the sources of law in such matters, once the validity of religious tradition has been done away with? To answer that it is the voice of the people or public opinion is not always convenient, because public opinion often opposes liberal legislators and, as I have mentioned, a number of important decisions have been made by legislative bodies against the views of the majority. Whatever the mechanism of making the law, liberal doctrines cannot accept that their spokesmen in legislative bodies have merely to follow, without correction, the current voice of the majority. Liberal ideology *is* an ideology, and it is bound to fight for its principles, whatever the majority might think. It appears that the liberal doctrine on this point can be summed up in the principle that only those acts may be declared illegal which, if permitted, would make tolerable life in this society impossible and cause the peaceful order to collapse or to deteriorate significantly. Murder, obviously, belongs to this category but homosexuality, for example, does not. Some cases are debatable—the use of drugs, for instance—but it is supposed that arguments for or against a given activity can be based on empirical evidence.

This principle seems to be reasonable and to conform to current perceptions about the law. Liberal legislation has been gaining ground since the sixteenth century in Western civilization, and the vestiges of the theocratic tradition, though still discernible, are now of little significance. Islamic countries will probably move the same way, although nobody can tell how long it will take. But to accept this principle, with all the problems and ambiguities it must create, does not contribute to answering the question I'm trying to cope with: Assuming that what we have at our disposal is a penal law, more liberal or less, based on practical considerations alone, with no living moral beliefs that give validity to the ideas of evil, guilt, sin, freedom of action, and retribution—can human communities survive at all? Penal law, supported solely by practical considerations, acts by fear of punishment alone. Can fear suffice? Fear may restrain the natural human impulses of greed, aggressiveness, and lust for power. But should we expect that such a morally emptied Hobbesian society, in which fear is the only binding force, would be viable?

Or, to put it differently: Can we live without feeling that the law is to be respected, not only dreaded?

This distinction between respect for and fear of the law is, of course, crucial in Kantian moral philosophy. Respect, in Kant's view, is not supposed to be an emotion (emotional motivations are morally worthless) but a phenomenon *sui generis*, neither fear nor love.

But can we respect the positive law for no better reason than that it *is* a law? And why should we? Most of us know only a tiny part of the immense body of legal regulations that proliferate endlessly, from one month to another. And these regulations are frequently changed, for good or bad reasons. What could produce in me a quasi-religious feeling of awe in the face of this *mysterium numinosum valde deridiculum*, this ridiculous deity, which consists of paper mountains that I will never be able to wade

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through anyway? And I leave aside the cases of oppressive codes in totalitarian or tyrannical regimes where to obey some of their laws would be morally repugnant and to defy and violate them is strongly recommended.

No, we cannot expect and we cannot demand respect for the law just because it has been promulgated, regardless of its content. What matters is not respect for this or that (often accidental) decision of the majority in a parliament or of a judge. Rather, what matters is respect for the moral law that might or might not coincide with the positive law and that involves the legally irrelevant distinction between good and evil.

Kant, when he was talking about the respect for law, had in view the moral law as he understood it; but I do not think that this part of his doctrine is entirely acceptable. To be sure, the Kantian distinction between obeying a law for prudential reasons and for moral reasons is obvious and valid. We normally do not steal a package of butter at a grocery, but this does not mean that we are honest people; it would simply be silly to do so, as the gain is minimal and to be caught would result in unpleasant consequences. This is admittedly a very simple example. But even when we do something apparently honest, without calculation and without any risk of being caught if we fail to do it, this by no means proves that we are up to Kantian standards. If I do something seemingly good—help other people, save them, even sacrifice myself—if I do so out of compassion, that is, if I am moved by an emotion, my act is morally worthless in Kantian terms, as only those acts are moral that are motivated by the sheer will to fulfill the law and nothing else. Kant admits, first, that such acts are rather unusual and rare. He admits, second, that when such an act does occur it is impossible to be certain that it actually has since we have no means of establishing the real content of other peoples' minds. He admits, third, that the agent himself is, practically speaking, incapable of stating firmly that his action is as pure and as void of emotional admixture as the moral imperatives demand. Self-deception is easy, and we often tend to attribute to ourselves nobler motivations than we actually possess.

Moreover, it is plausible to argue that when Kant speaks of acts that externally conform to the law but are performed for the wrong reasons, he uses a concept that is invalid on his own premises. To conform to the law, our actions should be precisely what the formal imperatives order them to be: that is to say, they should be motivated by a "maxim" that the agent is prepared to make universal. Therefore, it seems that there is simply no such thing as an "external" compliance with the moral law without the proper motivation. And, since evil is defined by disobedience of the law, we may even suspect that in Kant's terms—although he does not say it in so many words—when I do something out of compassion and love, my acts are not just morally worthless but positively evil, which sounds outrageous to the normal moral intuition.

Kant's moral doctrine seems to be very poorly designed as an educational device, more poorly even than the Augustinian-Calvinist theology of grace that it partially resembles. It suggests that as long as I am not perfect and holy I am simply evil in whatever I do; and to suggest that is the best recipe for nihilistic indifference—for we know and Kant knew that nobody is perfect. In other words, in practice we do not need to bother much about our conduct, being certain in advance that holiness is beyond our reach.

Still, however impracticable Kantian philosophy may be as a tool of moral education in the real world, it was the boldest attempt the Enlightenment ever made to establish moral principles as a separate realm of reason, logically independent from the legacy of a revealed religion and irreducible to empirical grounds or to hedonistic justifications. That no empirical evidence can be miraculously transmuted into moral rules: this idea Kant shared with Hume, without concluding, however, that therefore no such rules can be rationally constructed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I am not purporting, of course, to reflect upon the validity or soundness of Kantian ethics as a whole. But Kant was right, I believe, in stating that if we deny that the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, is *valid*, we simply deny the very possibility of a morality in the normal sense of the word; and if we deny that, there is no longer any way that respect for the moral law can be distinguished from fear of legal punishment. To accept this does not entail that one be logically compelled to embrace Kantian formalism, with its subsequent elimination of compassion and love from the catalogue of worthy motivations for morally good acts. Yet if the distinction between respect and fear is real, it seems to imply the validity of the concepts of sin, guilt, responsibility, and retribution. It implies, consequently, the idea of freedom of choice as well. And if freedom is empirically unprovable, this may be for other reasons than those adduced by Kant. On the contrary, it might be because freedom is a perfectly simple and very elementary experience that, being so simple and so elementary, is not analyzable any further: not unlike the idea of the self. It is one of the building blocks of our world of experience, but is not itself validly deducible from any empirical evidence that would be admissible in scientific procedures.

The same may be said about the distinction between good and evil, between moral duty and legal duty, between legal punishment and retribution. To believe that those distinctions are valid is to believe that there is a kind of natural law that binds us, that does not depend on arbitrary conventions or decrees, and that is accessible to us through a moral intuition. Throughout history many people have believed, and indeed keep believing, in such an order of things, no matter how this insight is phrased and how it is connected with—or disconnected from—its religious background. Are we still capable of sharing this belief? Certainly not if we surrender to the dogmas either of empiricism or of historicism. But why should we surrender? That there is something compelling in these dogmas has not been persuasively demonstrated.

In addition to making philosophical arguments for or against natural law, we may reflect on the likely outcome of the process whereby the notions of good and evil, of sin and retribution, would simply disappear from human minds. They have not disappeared yet, but they have been severely eroded in our civilization. Many people still do believe that they ought to do or to forbear from doing something simply because it is right, not because they are terrified by the specter of the police, judges, prison, and execution. My naïve question is: Could mankind survive without these people? And my answer is no. Mankind as we know it would not survive if the fear of legally inflicted suffering remained as the only instrument preventing us from indulging in whatever our passions drove us to. This is, I presume, a matter of common sense, based on the distinction between the human race and rats. It is also based on the strong disbelief in the doctrine according to which human behavior is entirely reducible to a system of inherited instincts and conditional reflexes.

Because there is evil in us, we need, of course, penal machinery: law, threats, and fear. But if there were nothing but evil in us, the very concepts of good and evil—as distinct from the concepts of pleasure and pain, profit and harm—would be so redundant and so useless that one hardly sees a reason that mankind should have concocted them at all. And the same may be said about the pair sin/retribution as distinct from crime/punishment. Because we are not entirely and irredeemably evil, it is good for us occasionally to think that we deserve retribution or that retribution may restore the order of the world we have disturbed by our sins. To dismiss this belief as a myth is easy, but does not answer these questions: Why has mankind throughout its history required a mythological order of the universe apart from a technical one? And what might happen should this order evaporate altogether?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by Leslie Norris, Louis Simpson & W. S. Di Piero*

from Bringing in the selves

Eight years old, he loves water,
knows streams, lakes,
the separate vegetations
of still and moving waters.
He has marked them turn brown
the few seasons of his winters.

He has in his mind
the names of waterbirds,
mallard, swan, moorhen;
he discovers and murmurs
their incantatory syllables.

He counts shadows of trout
hovering in water.

In a miracle of April
he walks by the river
collecting with his eyes
what the weather brings.

Mild rain polishes
the skins of new leaves.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A visitation of swallows,
wet, exhausted,
drops out of the hot countries.

Among white raindrops
they cling to the twigs
of a leafless birch tree.
Vulnerable warm bundles,
red-throated,
they flick their glossy wings,
do not fly
from the boy's unmoving intensity.

He holds every feather
in his memory, in the diffused
light shining
through waterdrops.

Warm air carries
the boy's regard
for the swallows,
for the little tree,
black nubs ready for leafing.

Come in, child, come in.
The circle is made.

—*Leslie Norris*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Working out

A middleaged man named Doherty
had the locker next to mine.
A detective. He showed me
scar tissue near his heart
where a bullet had gone in.

A new member joined, a woman
who was doing physiotherapy.
She was beautiful to watch
at Leg Curl and Leg Extension,
straddling a seat or lying down.

The tone of the whole place changed.
When she came, Doherty would run over
and be solicitous:
how was she feeling today,
and she mustn't overdo it.

Then she no longer came, she was cured,
and everything reverted:
the young men blowdrying their hair
assiduously, the old
telling their dirty stories.

And Doherty working out
at Pullover, Double Chest,
and Torso Arm . . . lifting weights
as though it were he or they
in a struggle to the death.

—*Louis Simpson*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Red roses

Five days later,
fuller, heavier,
blown but holding
their overripe pattern,
petals in flight
from the nowhere center . . .

Now longer, two weeks,
and redder, as if
our thought of Eden
raged inside.
What, you said. What
makes them do that?

Crouched over, shoulder
dipping toward the blooms
and their carnal thorns,
you sat up straight
when the earthquake came
that broke buildings in town,

before you bent again
to cut and trim these
to fill our largest vase.
What keeps them with us?
What do they keep?
That perfume soaks the air.

—*W. S. Di Piero*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letter from Jerusalem

Visual culture

by Jed Perl

Boris Schatz, the Bulgarian sculptor who believed that Jews could invent a Jewish art in Palestine and founded the Bezalel School in Jerusalem in 1906 to prove it, died in Denver, Colorado, in 1932. He was on yet another of his fund-raising drives, traveling around the United States with a trailerload of Bezalel arts and crafts, hoping to raise enough money to reopen the school, which had closed its doors in 1929 after twenty-three very checkered years. (The Bezalel Academy of today is the third institution to bear that name.) Reading about Schatz in the impressive catalogue that the Jewish Museum published in 1983 to accompany an exhibition devoted to the history of the Bezalel School, one does not exactly grow fond of the man. His own work is not lovable or even likable. There are a few images of pious Jews done in low relief that could perhaps be called tolerable, but for the most part his sculpture and painting is intolerable—comatose histrionics. His personality is not particularly lovable, either. He was a bombastic egotist (it shows in the work), careless of people in the way that people who get the job done often are. But, having said that, I hasten to add that without his iron egotist's will, Schatz would never have become involved in the mission impossible of bringing Jewish art culture to a Palestine where Jews wondered where their next meal was coming from—a local newspaper dismissed the school as "a pathetic factory of toys."

The Israel Museum exhibition "Bezalel 1906-1929" is but one of a number of scholarly projects through which the museum has endeavored to make sense of the history of Jewish art in the twentieth century. In the exhibition catalogue, one learns that Schatz was trying to do many things at once. Zionists in Europe supported the school because the development of Jewish crafts appeared to offer Jewish settlers the possibility of home industries that would bolster meager incomes earned from agricultural work. This was the practical side of the school. But the school was also committed to evolving a Jewish form of fine art, and although this goal tended to get lost in the political and financial upheavals of the school's difficult life, the search for a truly Jewish art was the engine of idealism that drove Schatz's pioneer operation.

While Schatz himself was a figure sculptor, he wanted to connect Zionist art to the anti-figurative traditions of Judaism and the Middle East. This is a project that has preoccupied many—even most—people who think seriously about Jewish art. Unfortunately, Schatz's idea of modern design amounted to little more than Arts and Crafts Movement boilerplate. Despite the charm of some of the rugs that the Bezalel workshops produced, we can hardly disagree with the students who went to the school only to reject Schatz and his program as hopelessly out of date. (They became part of Palestine's first generation of modernists.) It was not,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

however, the students who wanted to embrace Cubism and Paris who defeated Schatz. Even if he was all too much the product of the broken-down academic machinery of Europe to be entirely impressive, one is impressed by the institution he founded. It's moving to look through the catalogue, which has a bit of the effect of a scrapbook, with pages and pages in sepia ink devoted to period photographs of young —very young—men and women in the studios, on picnics, in amateur theatricals. "I sat at the piano," a student, Miriam Goldberg, recalls of one of the theatricals, "with my back to the stage and played polonaises while Agadati wore a lilac-coloured garment and danced to the strains of Chopin. Only he had not thought it necessary to wear anything under the robe . . . and suddenly I heard the crowd shout: 'Oh no! Oh no!' I continued playing without understanding while the people continued to cry 'Oh no!' and then I turned around to see how he danced to Chopin and suddenly understood what they were shouting about!" It was Schatz who brought these dreamers and adventurers together to be a part of the madness of pioneering art in Palestine, and their whole enterprise is suffused with the sweetness and hardship and exhilaration of being young in a country that has not yet been born. Ultimately it was the troubles involved in beginning anything in Palestine —and the internecine struggles between financially pinched Zionist organizations— that were Bezalel's undoing. Schatz, a man of tremendous energy and willfulness, drove his patrons in Berlin to distraction; when they stopped funding, he went out on his own, organizing displays of Bezalel crafts all over the world.

The Bezalel school produced almost nothing in the way of art or craft that can hold our attention. Nonetheless, the school was very much a part of the debate, developing around the turn of the century, as to whether there could ever be such a thing as a Jewish visual culture. The question was discussed at early Zionist congresses, as Yigal Zalmona explains in an essay in the Israel Museum catalogue. Most striking are the observations of Martin Buber at the Fifth Zionist Congress, held in Basel in 1901. Buber, Zalmona explains, felt that "Zionism was the expression of the Jewish people's desire for self-realization," and that "Jewish art was to be a part of that realization—its experiential, aesthetic part. . . . The existence of Jewish artists, Buber admitted, was still not sufficient to ensure Jewish art as an established fact. What, then, was this art? Art which was aware of the cultural heritage of the Jewish people, 'of its language, customs, the naïve folk art, its holy objects and its costume.' However, it did not relate to all these as sacred but rather as raw materials, as 'a block of marble awaiting our hands and our chisels.'" This search, within the visual evidence of Jewish history, for some beginnings of a Jewish visual culture, does not only inform the rather too cozy products of the Bezalel School but also the Jewish art of the Russian avant-garde, and the life work of Chagall. Buber's observations at the 1901 congress are tantalizing. "I expect Jewish art to be a splendid deepening and internalization of Zionism," Buber said. As for the specifics, Zalmona observes that Buber's words "seemed vague." But Buber nonetheless had "begun the great debate on the existence of a Jewish style beyond the existence of a Jewish iconography. This debate was to last for many years, and its echoes are still heard today."

It is never easy to make generalizations about the visual style of a particular people or country or civilization, and when the topic is the visual culture of the Jews, the difficulties can seem insurmountable. The injunction against idols cast the entire idea of visual representation into doubt for long periods of time, and even when a significant Jewish visual art appeared, it was so much an admixture of the various cultures among whom the Jews were living at the time that the question of pinpointing essentials becomes problematical. For Jews in the Diaspora, this question of the nature of Jewish art is something that is considered, if at all,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rather theoretically, as a sort of intellectual conundrum. I would have imagined, before spending a couple of weeks in Israel, that in the largely secular world in which thinking about art goes on in Israel these questions would feel equally theoretical; but it is now my impression that the difficult history of Judaism and the visual arts comes to color everything that goes on in the Israeli art world.

Judaism is not the only religion that puts limits on the arts; Islam does, too. But Islam developed, over centuries, a rich visual-arts tradition. Jewish visual culture is by comparison rather thin—a result, obviously, of circumstance above all else—and is dominated by a melancholy series of "What if?" questions. What if some substantial fragments remained from the First or Second Temple? What if the great synagogues of Europe still stood? What if there had for centuries been a country the Jews called their own, where they might have developed a visual culture? In Israel the secular answer to these questions comes in the form of an obsession with archaeology. The secularist says, "If we dig, we will find out what." The secularist believes that Jews live in the complex relativity of history, and must find answers amidst it. But there is also, now in Israel, an ultra-orthodox answer to the "What if?" question. There is talk, in some fringe Orthodox circles (and I emphasize that these are extremists), of the building of the Third Temple—of preparations, of the creation of ritual objects and garments, of the breeding of a red heifer. Here the answer to "What if?" is "What was will be again."

The Israel Museum—which celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary a year ago—can be thought of as a multi-dimensional attempt to answer the "What if?" question. It's an answer that comes, almost Talmudically, in the form of many small answers—of detailed observations on this or that particular matter. Here, where most of the treasures from the digs around the country are gathered together with objects rescued from the Holocaust, the material culture of the Jews begins to take on an internal logic. At the emotional center of the museum's collections there is a minute ivory receptacle in the form of a pomegranate, which may be the only remnant of the First Temple period, a perfume flask that hung from a priest's robe. Seen in the Israel Museum, this stylized pomegranate takes on the kind of centrality that the Avignon Pieta, traditionally viewed as the beginning of French painting, has in the Louvre. The severe beauty of this container, with its elegant summing-up of a natural form, may be one aspect of—one clue to—a Jewish visual ideal.

In the Israel Museum we feel the Jewish doubts about visual art as a pressure that can be brought to bear on the visual. And somehow, here, the latter development of Jewish art—a marble relief of a palm tree and a mosaic of a synagogue interior, both from the Byzantine period; a nineteenth-century sukkah (a wooden room in which Jews eat out of doors on the Feast of Tabernacles) decorated with folk paintings of city and country—somehow all of this takes on an inner order, as a series of attempts to wrest some generally Jewish meaning out of many different styles and stylizations. The question of a Jewish style is, of course, an old question; it is the achievement of the Israel Museum that it gives this question, for the very first time, a visual form. The very shape of the museum—a series of pavilions, connected and sometimes overlapping, yet discrete—can be seen as a metaphor for this open-ended response to the "What if?" question.

I think that the physical character of Jerusalem itself helps to focus our experience of the Israel Museum. It's as if that parched landscape of stone upon stone and mauve shadows gives to Jewish art a visual gestalt—in much the way the Seine gives a visual gestalt to the French art in the Louvre, or the Hague gives a visual gestalt to Dutch painting in the Mauritshuis. Skeptics and scholars will say that much of what one sees at the Israel Museum has nothing to do with this setting, and was indeed done by people who hadn't the faintest notion of what Jerusalem looks like. In response I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would say that tradition is a mysterious thing, a leap of faith, and the early Zionists who thought that a leap into a Jewish visual culture would best be done against the background of the Middle East were not far from wrong. Being here, the Jewish recoil from the full illusionism of Western art makes perfect sense. In the magnificent old homes that one visits in Jerusalem, paintings are not much in evidence. The old stone walls ask for a different sort of ornamentation, for cloth hangings, for something bold and decorative.

And yet, even as one feels a visual culture coming into focus here, I must say that I have never been in another country where the people who are professionally preoccupied with the visual arts are so extraordinarily diffident about their chosen field. In addition to the doubts that dog the arts everywhere today—that they are irrelevant, that their links to the past are lost—Israelis carry the additional doubt that the arts were ever, save in a subservient decorative form, meaningful. Israelis who are involved in the arts are, for the most part, far too much in the secular world to feel the injunction against graven images as a factor in the day-to-day conduct of their careers: yet they seem to have assimilated the Jewish anxiety about visual culture as a sort of personal condition of doubt. I find it strange that this should be the case, yet I do not think I am entirely mistaken in believing it to be so. Over the summer, the Tel Aviv Museum was sponsoring a large show of contemporary Israeli work, and one didn't even have to think what one's reaction would be to this gathering of mostly tepid SoHo imitations—the Israelis thought it too much of an embarrassment to discuss. One hears meek arguments for this or that artist, but there is little conviction.

Perhaps the trouble is that the art community here feels too sophisticated to imagine that its Jewishness could mean anything anymore; and then, with alarm, has found that in its liberated state the Israeli art scene is the neediest of all provincial scenes —a scene without even the comfort of a great lost history. Then the tiresome looking toward the art centers begins. That's where things stand now. So I arrive in Israel and find that the things I thanked my lucky stars were on display in SoHo for only a month have become museum exhibitions. It was bad enough having to see the Starn Twins' exercise in Holocaust chic, the *Lack of Compassion Series*, at the Castelli Gallery, but here it is in the Israel Museum, on what I guess promises to be permanent display. A cheering note is to find, in Israel, people who are fed up with Holocaust chic. I am tired of hearing, from non-Jews in America, about how they love Anselm Kiefer at the Israel Museum and how that means that all American Jews must fall in line and love Kiefer, too. One Israeli, a liberal and Zionist much involved in the arts, said, "It was enough that the Nazis made Jews into soap, do Jews have to make the Holocaust into soap opera?"

A brief visit to Jerusalem is not a basis on which I would think to make a judgment about Israeli art—a visit in the summer, when most of the galleries, which are in Tel Aviv, were closed, and nobody could think of a particular show worth going to. But it can definitely be said that much of what is of consequence in art here involves archaeological and custodial work—the putting in order of an artistic past that the centuries of the Diaspora and the Holocaust have left practically invisible. If you read the catalogue of the Bezalel show at the Israel Museum, or of the show of Russian avant-garde Jewish art mounted there in 1987, you feel the intensity of the activity.

The catalogue of the Russian show—its full title is "Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912-1928"—is brilliant and moving. Here, one feels Buber's dream of a Jewish art that internalizes Zionism coming into being—and then being, even before it is fully formed, obliterated. For young Russian Jews at the beginning of our century the secular world was only starting to open up, and the non-representational trends in con-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

temporary art could seem like a miraculous affirmation of Judaism's traditionally anti-representational disposition. To see a connection between Jewish visual culture and the visual culture of modernism was to see history falling into place, traditions joining up. Somewhere around 1916, El Lissitzky, then in his mid-twenties, went with another artist, Issachar Ryback, to look for some old folk synagogues that were along the Dnieper River. The expedition was financed by the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society in Saint Petersburg, and the beautiful "Memoirs Concerning the Mohilev Synagogue" that El Lissitzky published in the Yiddish magazine *Rimon/Milgroim* in Berlin in 1923 convey all the excitement of finding a traditional Jewish art that could be praised in the terms of the new art that was coming out of France and Germany. "The entire shape [of the synagogue's interior]," he writes, "was organized by the painter with just a few basic colors, so saturated that an entire vast world lives here, blossoms forth and fills up this none-too-large cube." El Lissitzky could be talking about the work of Robert Delaunay. The next year, the artist Boris Aronson published his book *Contemporary Jewish Graphics* and spoke of Hebrew script as if it were Paul Klee's line launching off on an adventure without limits. "Jews have never had a naturalistic art," Aronson observes, and of course we are meant to understand that "the surprising unity of Jewish ornaments, their abstract, two-dimensional character," links up with Kandinsky and Mondrian, with Cubism and Constructivism. There was even a most sophisticated Russian art critic, Abram Markovich Efros, who made a specialty of Jewish art. All of this flourished for a decade or so, and then was for the most part lost in the Jews' drive for secularism and the institutionalization of anti-Semitism in the USSR.

The great exception, of course, was the most interesting of the Russian Jewish artists, Chagall, who was careful, as a Parisian artist, to never let his Jewishness define him, but was also unwilling to deny that part of the Jewish modernist dream that might be of use to him. Chagall's early graphic style is the purest expression of the joining of abstract design and Jewish calligraphic fantasy: his steely ink lines, disposed in odd angular configurations, unfold a whole world of heads-in-the-clouds scholars and down-to-earth housewives and cows and lovers and synagogues. In later years, of course, Chagall's work oftentimes got too easy—a cascade of color shapes and wobbly figures that did service for scenes from Don Quixote or the Bible with scarcely a distinction being made. Yet Chagall carried those dreams of a Jewish art within him—or at least that is how it appears, for when the idea for a series of windows illustrating the twelve tribes for a chapel at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem was presented to him in 1959, he embraced the project as if the whole pressure of that generation of Russian Jewish dreamers were behind him, pushing him forward. In the Jerusalem Windows, it all came together for Chagall.

Visiting the windows for the first time is an odd experience, because nobody seems to care about them anymore. In part it is that tourism is off in Israel, and that the repeat tourists—and they are the people who mostly go to Israel now—have all seen the windows long ago, when they were installed in the early Sixties. In addition, it is difficult for people to imagine (despite the major religious art and architecture created in France after World War II) that there is such a thing as a sophisticated modern religious art. And in the midst of this context of public indifference and incomprehension, the Jerusalem Windows stand, a breathtaking, epochal achievement.

Stained glass was the perfect medium for Chagall. His graphic gifts were given free rein in the elaborate *grisaille* that he painted directly on the glass. "He treats the glass," the art historian Franz Meyer explained a couple of years after the windows were completed, "as he does the paper in his india ink drawings." And the luxuriousness of the glass itself (which was produced in Reims: this Jewish artist trusted French craftsmen) resolved the uncertainties that Chagall had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with color, which often is the thing that sinks his later work. I think that the Chagall windows are one of the two masterpieces of modern religious art; Matisse's chapel in Vence is the other. A comparison is instructive. For Matisse, who looked back on the immense body of Christian art, a modern religious art was of necessity an art of reduction. All that there was left to do was to summarize, in the most marvelous shorthand of all time, two thousand years of Christian art. For Chagall, on the other hand, the challenge was to answer the "What if?" question: What if the Jews had built synagogues as great as the cathedrals? And in the Jerusalem Windows he set out to create something as rich and full as the windows at Chartres. I think the Jerusalem Windows are not defeated by the comparison. Looking at the windows, one feels that history is—at last—on a Jewish artist's side. Chagall is connecting with his own past: there are motifs in the windows that are borrowed from Russian Jewish folk imagery that had been uncovered by the avant-gardists half a century before.

As for Jerusalem itself, it mostly eludes representation. There is little, really, that twentieth-century artists can add to the images of Jerusalem created by medieval artists who had never seen the city. The Jerusalem in Duccio's *Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* is truer to the city than any painting done from life. Jerusalem necessitates the high-conceptual approach of the Middle Ages—something that says this city is all Spirit and Idea. Or else the city could be caught by the lens of the nineteenth-century photographer—which says that every picture is a fragment, that you can never know it whole. Jerusalem will not, beyond this, sit for its portrait.

It can, however, be sketched. There are some beautiful modern pictures of Jerusalem and the Judean hills—the small-sized drawings in charcoal and touches of pastel that Anna Ticho produced in the 1960s and 1970s. On sheets of paper little more than six inches wide, Ticho uses heavy but lively strokes to indicate hills and valleys, thickets of trees, blocky buildings. The lines are very large in relation to the sheets of paper; the surprising scale gives the images their weight, their more-than-naturalistic force. Ticho, who died in 1980 at the age of eighty-six, had lived in Jerusalem since 1912, and when we look at her later drawings we can feel the familiarity—we know that even with her eyes closed, Ticho could trace the contours of those Judean hills. At the same time the blunt extravagance of the leaping, stabbing charcoal and pastel marks places Ticho in the company of the modern European Expressionists—reminds us that she had been born in Vienna and had, as a girl, had her only formal training there.

Ticho reduces the city to highly simplified graphic arabesques. Her drawings are a form of calligraphy, a form of writing—landscape as a series of flashes of intuition. Like much of the poetry written about Jerusalem in this century, Ticho's drawings are a liberal-spirited meditation on a cityscape that has been built, stone by stone, out of extremes of faith that a secularist can observe but scarcely comprehend. Meditation becomes a kind of comprehension; there is a quality of having made peace that permeates Ticho's drawings and no doubt in part accounts for the special place that she has in the hearts of Jerusalemites. While many of Ticho's large-scale drawings can feel overworked and fussy, these small ones are immediate and elegiac—their elegant rhythms of receding light and dark planes recall, just a bit, the ordering intelligence that is at work in the landscape drawings of Claude Lorrain. Taken as a whole, Ticho's career, which is limited to graphic work, isn't especially large, yet the dryness of the graphic medium is right for Jerusalem, a city of stone that will not submit (or has at least not yet submitted) to the sensuousness of oil paint. In Jerusalem, even an art lover can begin to wonder about oil paint.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

Remaking Bearden

by Eric Gibson

It's often the case these days that one's pleasure at seeing an admired artist receive deserved recognition in the form of a museum retrospective is tempered by the way in which that effort is undertaken. Sometimes one's disappointment involves only the omission of important, or favorite, works. On other occasions, however, it goes further, extending to reservations about the very way in which that artist is presented, about what we are asked to make of him.

This is very much the case with Romare Bearden (1912-1988), a retrospective of whose work was shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem last summer and is currently touring the country.[1] (It's been Bearden season. Last month the ACA Galleries mounted its own Bearden show drawn from the artist's estate, including the marvelous *Family Dinner* [1968] shown in the Museum of Modern Art's 1971 Bearden retrospective.)

Bearden was one of those artists who have always eluded easy categorization. During the 1960s, when painting dominated the art scene, he chose to work in (and dramatically re-invented) collage, a genre that had not been operating at the center of artistic thought for nearly half a century.

He invoked personal experience and reminiscence at a time when Pop and Minimalism had made irony and aloofness the common currency of art. This gave his work a quasi-representational character that stood at odds with the prevailing climate of abstraction. One indication of Bearden's position outside the mainstream of his time is the fact that he is left out of *American Art of the 1960s*, Irving Sandler's art chronicle of that decade.

And while Bearden certainly benefited from the climate of increased racial tolerance that grew out of the civil-rights movement, his career was well on its way long before. As early as 1948, the Museum of Modern Art purchased a Bearden painting, a notable event considering that MOMA's commitment to contemporary art was then nothing in comparison to what it would become a decade later.

At the heart of the Bearden anomaly, however, is the tendency of many critics to speak only of his contribution to collage, to see him simply as a seminal artist in that

1 "Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden, 1940-1987" opened at the Studio Museum in Harlem (April 14-August 11) and is currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (September 28-November 10). It will travel to the Wight Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles (December 8-February 2, 1992), the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (March 10-May 3), the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (May 30-July 23), and the National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C. (October 2-January 4, 1993). A catalogue, with essays by Sharon F. Patton and Mary Schmidt Campbell and an introduction by Kinshasha Holman Conwill, has been published by the Studio Museum in Harlem/Oxford University Press (127 pages, $45; $19.95 paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

medium, despite the fact that his subject matter—and to some extent his formal language—was drawn from experiences as an American black growing up in the South, and living in Pittsburgh and Harlem. The current retrospective seeks to counter this approach to Bearden's work.

What's troubling about the retrospective—not the works themselves but the writing done about them for the catalogue—is that while attempting to pay close attention to the content of Bearden's paintings and collages, the exhibition organizers are continually drawing conclusions about the "meaning" of Bearden's career. He is made out to be exclusively a black artist. He is depicted as an artist who has received something less than his due. Finally, he is even painted as a godfather of the multicultural ethos of our own day. Most of these claims can be easily dismissed. But they disfigure Bearden, making him a prisoner of the art politics he so strenuously avoided throughout his life.

Bearden was born in 1912 in Charlotte, North Carolina, and spent childhood summers with his grandmother in Pittsburgh before moving to New York in the Thirties. After graduating from New York University (with a degree in mathematics) in 1935, Bearden enrolled in the Art Students League where he had George Grosz as an instructor. The influence of Grosz's political satire and incisive drawing style would prompt Bearden to work for a brief time as an editorial cartoonist.

For the next twenty-five years, Bearden's career followed a predictable but nonetheless respectable pattern. In the early Forties he went through a Social Realist phase. Some religious paintings (it was one of these that MOMA acquired) and a number of figure studies done in a manner reminiscent of Hans Hofmann (Fauve color superimposed on Cubist drawing) also date from these years. This work is accomplished, but there is rather too much of it in the show. It gives the impression of being the product of apprenticeship rather than of inspiration. Two or three of these earlier Beardens would have sufficed.

Between infantry service in World War II and departure for an eighteen-month visit to Paris on the G.I. Bill, Bearden participated in a handful of exhibitions, among them the 1946 Whitney Annual. He also had a one-man show at the Samuel Kootz Gallery, one of the few galleries then showing the emerging Abstract Expressionists. Bearden undertook his own Abstract Expressionist experiments from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, although to judge from the limited examples in the show, his work in this vein was of a very academic sort. Trills and spatters of paint overlay a ground of color washes. Once again, perfectly respectable, but uninspired.

Soon after, in 1964, Bearden discovered in collage his signature mode, a way of working that grew out of a practice of painting on sheets of rice paper and gluing torn strips onto a canvas. But the collages he produced don't look anything like what Picasso, Braque, or Motherwell ever produced.

Bearden cut up sheets of colored paper and pictures in magazines, creating out of these fragments a representational, narrative art in which no detail was ignored. Every figure, object, and interior or outdoor setting was meticulously composed of multiple pieces of paper, with a deliberate unconcern for contradictions in the scale of the figures. Giant faces are attached to small heads, outsized hands are joined to puny wrists. The effect is one of vigorous energy imbued with a suggestive unreality.

It was also at this time that Bearden discovered, in his own experiences, his true subject. Like other black artists of his generation, Bearden felt that his racial identity should occupy a prominent place in his art. In a statement quoted in the catalogue, Bearden once said that he tried to "establish a world through art in which the validity of my Negro experience could live and make its own logic." Accordingly, he began drawing on memories of his boyhood in North Carolina and Pittsburgh, and on daily life in Harlem. His subjects centered around re-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ligious and homely rituals—baptism and burial, bathing, dressing, and eating a meal. There are also less formal encounters centered around conversations, games of cards, playing music, and working in the fields. Frequently, these images are tinged with mystery, as in the depictions of a "conjure woman," a sort of female witch doctor.

Nevertheless, Bearden was anything but an exclusively "black" artist. Although after he turned to the past and his own experience for subject matter his art changed dramatically, becoming at once more individual and more authentic, he reached far beyond racial and personal history in his search for significance. Indeed, if Bearden felt the need to articulate in his art his own experience as an American black, he also spoke often of his striving for a universal artistic statement. His art endures today, years, even decades after it was made, because of his ability to address the general through the particular. Routine though they are, the actions and rituals depicted in his collages carry symbolic weight: bathing becomes a process of spiritual as well as physical cleansing; the locomotive which appears so often in his work symbolizes the larger world outside. Invariably, his work evokes a realm beyond that of its immediate subject.

Bearden attains universality primarily through his relation to the art of the past. His work is embedded in tradition, be it that of African sculpture or of European art. The women of his Storyville brothel interiors exude the languid heat of the odalisques of Ingres and Matisse. Bearden absorbed any number of influences, from Old Master painting to jazz. His use of large areas of pure color reveals a visible debt to Matisse, while his flattening of form and space and manipulation of multiple viewpoints harkens back to Cubism. But Bearden assimilated his influences so thoroughly that it is difficult to name specific sources. The syncopated rhythms of his collages suggest Dada and Surrealism, motion pictures, and music, without actually pointing to any one of them.

In a sense, Bearden re-invented collage by turning it on its head. A pictorial mode which had its roots in abstraction is made to serve a representational vision. Construction yields to depiction. A Bearden collage is an overall fabric of papered, drawn, and painted areas in which form is defined by shape, pattern, texture, and color rather than contour, as with Matisse or the Cubists. Within the overall flat pictorial plane, space is indicated by juxtapositions of scale. Every piece of paper stands for all or part of some real-world person or thing.

It's a style that in lesser hands could have been nothing more than a pasted paper version of paint-by-numbers kitsch. But Bearden avoids that by generalizing his references. For example, he represents lampshade fringe in a collage with a scrap of wavy red paper, not a photograph of fringe cut from a magazine. Bearden's novel procedure takes an established modernist idiom and greatly enlarges its potential. By renewing its syntax and broadening its range of subjects, Bearden transforms collage into a vehicle for what is personal, autobiographical, and even regional in one's individual experience. He also makes it speak with a richer voice. Bearden's work runs the gamut from the buoyantly celebratory to the elegiac, somber, hallucinatory, and brooding. He did this not only through his handling of his subjects and pasted papers, but with color, which plays an indispensable compositional and expressive role in his collages.

Even for someone familiar with Bearden's art, the exhibition at the Studio Museum, which brought together some 140 examples of his work, was an unforgettable experience. Depicting a master modernist giving authentic voice to any number of affecting human interludes, it offered sentiment without sentimentality. But the picture of Bearden we got from the exhibition was marred by what the organizers were trying to make of it. Throughout her catalogue essay, Sharon F. Patton, Chief Curator of the Studio Museum, discusses Bearden largely in the context of black culture. There's nothing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wrong with placing Bearden in his cultural context, of course, but the tone of the essay is proprietary, as though Bearden belonged only to a single individual or group.

There's also the matter of the way Bearden's career is presented. Both Kinshasha Holman Conwill, Director of the Studio Museum, and Mary Schmidt Campbell, lately New York City's Cultural Affairs Commissioner and now dean of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, feel that Bearden was hard done by. They point out that Bearden was nearly sixty at the time of his first museum retrospective, and they note the paradox of Bearden's lifelong *succès d'estime* and his absence from major textbooks and exhibitions.

They're asking a familiar question: why do some artists get their share of recognition while others don't? It's a reasonable question, but I can't help feeling that they believe the answer has largely to do with racial prejudice. If that is what they think, they need to reread the record. Bearden may have been nearly sixty by the time of the Museum of Modern Art retrospective, but he had matured late, in his fifties. With that taken into account, things look rather better. Then there is the string of museum purchases—his work is in almost every major museum in the country—and regular gallery exhibitions.

As to why Bearden doesn't occupy a more prominent position in our culture, that's a question anyone who follows art asks himself any number of times a month about any number of artists. History is fickle. It seems to get the main points right—who invented what—but often falls down on the areas in between. On the other hand, history is also fluid. There is consolation to be derived from the continuous process of review that goes on, much of it precipitated by exhibitions such as this one. Bearden may not have been treated as well as some would like, but he hasn't done badly, either.

In any event, it is difficult to imagine Bearden countenancing Dr. Campbell's attempts to paint him as a godfather of multiculturalism, an artist whose "repudiation of mainstream art, a concept which implies a monolithic, cultural supremacy," and whose "fierce assertion of his own cultural identity and history" helped pave the way for the art of the 1990s. Further on, having told us that Bearden's work reflects "an underlying moral view of the world," Dr. Campbell insists that

> Bearden's willingness to take a moral position reflected what would become a growing disaffection among younger artists with the disconnectedness of post-World War II art. Even the most cursory look back at the 1980s confirms this. The most important work of public art, Maya Linn's [*sic*] Vietnam War memorial, quietly condemns the waste of individual human life without diminishing the heroism of the men and women who sacrificed their lives. The lynch fragments of Melvin Edwards—pieces constructed as early as 1963—are harsh judgments against racial violence and at the same time herald a transcendental attitude towards that violence. More recently, David Wojnarowicz' condemnation of the official repression of the information on AIDS, or Maria Brito-Avellana's child carved like a santeria out of a crib, are examples of works that rest firmly on the artists' cultural traditions and values. Clearly, Bearden set a tone that would prevail at the *fin de siècle*.

This, of course, is tendentious cant. It is also unwittingly ironic, for it attempts to ghettoize an artist whose best work far transcends the cultural politics that Dr. Campbell champions. Bearden was a master of collage. Bearden was a celebrator of black experience. But he was also something more, and to focus on only one of these aspects of his achievement leaves us with less than half an artist.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

A lot of Fussell about nothing

by James Bowman

Every once in a while an intelligent and educated person who has produced a body of work worthy of the attention of his fellow man is struck by a sudden and lamentable attack of intellectual megalomania. Having learned from friends and reviewers that he is a man of taste, discrimination, and refinement, he falls victim to a peculiar sort of *hubris* which convinces him that he is (or ought to be) the Tyrant of Taste, the Despot of Discrimination, and the Rajah of Refinement—in fact, the Grand Panjandrum of Intellectual Snobbery.

This unhappy fate has befallen Paul Fussell, Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania and author of many books, including *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). In his latest book, *BAD, or, The Dumbing of America*, [1] Professor Fussell takes up where he left off in his previous excursion into matters of taste, *Class* (1984). Upper-case BAD is his *mauvais mot* for that which is vulgar, ugly, stupid, or inferior and pretends to be the opposite. But such pretension is hardly a new or remarkable thing; it is almost the definition of vulgarity, ugliness, stupidity, and inferiority as human qualities that they do not recognize themselves as such. Therefore, it is hard to see what this merely typographical neologism contributes to originality of meaning.

Far worse is that the vagueness of the term (see "BAD language") allows him to include far too much in the category it represents. Much of what he identifies as BAD is not even bad, except for the fact that he does not like it. It is not necessary to deny that American education, taste, and manners are indeed in a sorry state to see how far beyond the judicious he has allowed himself to go in condemning them. His book in the end is merely a collection of the things in contemporary American life he does not approve of, conveniently arranged so that he can throw clods at them.

That in itself would not be so bad if he could do it with the artfulness of a Swift—or even a Mencken. I have nothing against the cruelly satiric thrust even against targets I believe to be undeserving of it. Swift's ridicule directed at the quarrel of the big-endians and the little-endians is no less effective or memorable for the fact that squabbles about ritual are based on something real and important to devout Christian believers. But Fussell's sallies are almost entirely bluster: the Autocrat of Aesthetics tells us with little reasoning and no wit that something is BAD, and we must simply accept it as such.

Taste, of course, is notoriously resistant to logical demonstration, but that is why those who set themselves up as its arbiters had better have resources of verbal grace and elegance to fall back on. The writer on taste must persuade by the example of his own taste, not by the loudness either of his voice

1 *BAD, or, The Dumbing of America*, by Paul Fussell; Summit, 201 pages, $19.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or of his typography. This Fussell strikingly fails to do. Such wit as the book contains is quoted from Tom Wolfe, Ada Louise Huxtable, Barbara Ehrenreich, and others; his own contribution is to act as a chorus, pronouncing in tones of mock outrage: "doesn't it make you want to *throw up?*"

No, it doesn't, frankly. Or at least quite a lot of it doesn't. What kind of hypersensitive bore do you have to be to pronounce your anathemata upon hotels' calling their customers "guests" or turning down their bedclothes in the evening, salespeople wishing that you might have a nice day or waiters that you might have a pleasant meal? What Professor Fussell seems to object to, really, is anything that is done with commercial motives (BAD airports, he says, are caused by "unregulated free enterprise") which is not as crass as he imagines all things commercial to be in reality. He froths at the mouth about "networking parties" at which "the greedy young exchange business cards in the hope of rising in the commercial world" as if such hopes themselves branded those who treasure them as incorrigible boors.

As a commentary on manners, this leaves a lot to be desired. Even the old British upper-class contempt for those "in trade" was tempered by a recognition that such people had their place. If wanting them to stay in it is snobbery, what are we to call wanting them not to exist? What harm is done to Paul Fussell or all the tribe of those who profess "English" by the exchange of business cards between consenting adults? The services of the Mogul of Manners are not required unless there is some breach of decorum, such as the foisting upon one of unwanted business cards on an inappropriate social occasion. Moreover, his own manners are not impeccable. The vulgarity of saying that the magazine *Majesty* is "for people who get an erection when they think of the Queen Mother" is by many degrees more repellent than the vulgarity it attempts to ridicule.

It is true that there is much in this book about bad art, bad architecture, bad poetry, and bad education, even bad restaurants (let us forgo the tiresome typography hereafter), that readers of this journal are likely to agree with, although they are not likely to need Fussell to tell them about it. But some of his judgments, proclaimed with a pontifical certainty, are bizarre at best and stupid or uninformed at worst.

The philistinism of saying that "much of the Beatles' and Simon and Garfunkel's music is better written than most of the music of Sir Edward Elgar," for example, takes the breath away. I suspect that such a pronunciamento is actually a clumsy attempt to show that this old square is hep, as the old squares of the Sixties used to say when there were scores of them on every college campus. What you really need to do that, however, is to find a suitably flash band of the moment (R.E.M.? They Might Be Giants?) and say, as Wilfred Mellers used to say of the Beatles, that they are the greatest songsmiths since Schubert. A pox on this namby-pamby, half-hearted sucking up to the young!

Poor old Elgar! What did he do to incur the enmity of Paul Fussell? Never mind, he is in good company. In a list of greats as long as your arm, in part cribbed from the writings of that well-known musicologist, Don Lessem, the author of *The Worst of Everything*, Fussell turns the thumbs down on Percy Grainger (what I wouldn't give to hear what Grainger would have said about *him!*), Leonard Bernstein, Charles Münch, Sergiu Celibidache (who, of all people, is branded as egotistical), Sir Neville Marriner, Bruckner's and Dvořák's Ninth Symphonies, Ives's *Three Places in New England*, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (like Dvořák's *New World* overperformed rather than bad), *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (Frank Loesser at the top of his form: now *he* might give old Schubert a run for his money), *Finlandia*, the "less brisk passages" of Wagner's *Ring* (*brisk?* what has Wagner got to do with brisk?), and the whole of *Tosca*.

Silly man! He obviously knows nothing of music. Nor is he much more clued in about the movies. There his targets are so obvious

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as to be embarrassing (who ever supposed that *The Robe* or *The Bible* were any good?) or else they are simply misconceived. *Batman* and *Dick Tracy*, two of the best of the "blockbuster" genre, are condemned, it seems, simply for being blockbusters. And the actors, all of good to outstanding talent, who evoke the censure of our superior critic include Richard Widmark, Robert Duvall, Peter Falk, Robert Mitchum, Omar Sharif, Carol Burnett, Hume Cronyn, Don Ameche, and Ronald Reagan.

Reagan, to be fair, gets it in the neck less for his sins as an actor (he was a good journeyman actor rather than a bad one) than for being an ideologically unsound president. Fussell never misses an opportunity to blast away at the former president (and at the present one too) in terms which suggest that fundamentally anti-intellectual assumption common among university folk that those who might have different political views from their own are knaves or fools. Thus know-nothing leftism is added to a kind of academic (it doesn't even rise to intellectual) snobbery to produce the correct taste in politicians. As in music and the cinema, P. Fussell may not know much about politics but he knows what he likes.

His ignorance about these performing arts, however, is as nothing compared to his ignorance about military and technological matters. He includes a long catalogue of bridge and roof collapses in the chapter on bad engineering, as if these were somehow new or unique to America, and then—ever the proud professor—he proposes that "it might not be going too far to suggest that if the people responsible were educated as well as trained . . . they might have more elastic imaginations." Such imaginations might, in turn, make them care more about people than the big businesses they work for and that, in turn, would enable them to design and build things that never fell down. Then again, it might be going too far after all.

Why is the *Challenger* more representative of "the American achievement" than all the spacecraft that completed their missions successfully? Why are the few bridges and buildings that collapse more representative than the millions that stay up? Whose idea is it, besides his own, that it is "the pretension to engineering excellence on which the preposterous American position in the Cold War has depended"? And, above all, what on earth is what he calls "a pretentious technology"? The whole point about technology is that, unlike professors of English, it is incapable of pretension: either it works or it doesn't. What we seem to have in this chapter is a professor who is engaged in the intellectually proletarian exercise of compiling a selection of disasters in order to prove that the situation of his country is disastrous. And pretentious, while he's at it.

But his worst offense against logic is also an offense against imagination, taste, and judgment, the very qualities with which His Professorship, the critic, ought to be able to outshine the drudges who merely build and create things. Here is his explanation of why it was the U.S. Navy and its "showy technology" which caused the explosion of the Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988:

> The Pan Am plane was destroyed to avenge the BAD missile firing by the Navy that brought down an Iranian airliner some months before. The Navy's mistake—it thought the civilian plane a fighter plane about to attack—was in large part occasioned by reliance on grandiose electronic sensing and aiming equipment. It was also caused by the sailors' being scared so shitless—or so automatically following Navy regulations—that they wouldn't allow the terrifying object to get close enough to be identified by an old-fashioned CPO looking at it through binoculars.

The first thing to notice here is the moral imbecility of saying that the Navy "caused" the Lockerbie disaster, even though it was in fact Middle Eastern terrorists who had never worn Uncle Sam's uniform, so far as anyone knows, who planted the bomb. The un-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spoken assumption is that the terrorists' unspeakable act was somehow outside their control: once the Navy shot down the Iranian plane there was an unbreakable chain of cause-and-effect which led them, ineluctably, to do what they did. And behind that one is, of course, another assumption which grants the terrorists' claim to a moral equivalence between the accidental and the deliberate destruction of a civilian airliner.

This is like the logic of William Shawcross in *Sideshow*, a book that attempted to blame the Khmer Rouge's massacre of over a million of their fellow Cambodians on the U.S. —for being beastly to the Khmer Rouge in the first place. There is a certain kind of moral mind that can only function at all when it is tracking the source of all the evil in the world back to the United States of America. But that generic incapacity by no means exhausts the multi-faceted stupidity of Paul Fussell, *homme de lettres*. He manages to blame the "grandiose" electronic equipment as well as frightened sailors and a bureaucratic Navy for relying on it instead of low-tech binoculars—presumably because he is incapable of grasping the realities of modern warfare in which, by the time you see your enemy, he's already killed you.

What can we call it but a failure of imagination to sneer at the "scared shitless" sailors whose lives could have depended upon not giving a potential enemy aircraft the benefit of the doubt? Are we really to suppose that Paul Fussell in their place would have rushed up on deck with his technologically correct binoculars to watch for a passing airliner or an incoming missile, as the case might be? And what can we call it but a failure of taste and judgment, to say nothing of common humanity, to suggest to those sailors that anyone with an ounce of common sense would not have done what they did? Nor is that all. You can't get much more idiotic than to go on, as Fussell does, to say that it is "very likely" the same "reliance on showy technology" which caused the gun-turret explosion aboard the U.S.S. *Iowa*. The technology in that case was about a century old and indispensable to the winning of both World Wars. But, then, why should we expect him to know that?

And this is the man to write a book on "the dumbing of America"? Even in those areas where the professor of English might be presumed to know something worth telling the world about he does not come off very well. The chapter here on "BAD language" is mostly well picked-over material. And someone who is going to write about illiterate usage had better be careful himself not to use, as Fussell does, "honorific" to mean "honorable," "consummate" (*v.*) to mean "bring about" or "accomplish," and "comprise" to mean "compose." He thinks that "realty" for real-estate brokerage is British when it's only pretentious and "starters" for appetizers is pretentious when it's only British. In his assault upon linguistic pretension he supposes that "campaign" means the same as "war" and "segue" the same as "go" or "proceed," and he refuses to allow the cleverness of George Bush's phrase "voodoo economics" because "no one has the slightest idea of what *voodoo* really means."

Is that right? Not the *slightest* idea? That will be news to the millions of people who knew instantly what Bush was getting at and the thousands who still quote the phrase back at him, to his presumed embarrassment, every chance they get. Perhaps it is only smug, self-righteous, and pedantic professors of English who have no idea what this common word means—which is a good thing, since Fussell's book is written just for them.

The humanists reassessed

Anthony Grafton Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800. Harvard University Press, 330 pages, $34.95

reviewed by Paul Oskar Kristeller

This excellent new book by Anthony Grafton, Professor of History at Princeton Uni-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

versity, is a major contribution to scholarship. It is highly original, both in the problems it formulates and in the solutions it offers, acute in its reasoning, and elegant, sharp, and often witty in its presentation. It covers many aspects of the intellectual history of Europe from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, and is firmly based on both primary sources and secondary studies, some of them little known and hard to find. Many crucial sources are quoted in the original Latin or transliterated Greek, and there are very few typographical errors, something on which both the author and the press are to be congratulated. The result is a comprehensive panorama of European intellectual history which is so rich and diversified that even the specialist may learn a lot from it. It covers not only history and philology but also the natural sciences and philosophy, jurisprudence and theology, and throws new light on even well-known facts by showing their connections with certain little-known details.

The volume consists of nine chapters, all of which had been published separately in periodicals or miscellaneous volumes between 1977 and 1991, to which a new introduction has been added. This essay, "The Humanists Reassessed," serves to explain the basic purpose and method of the volume and to give an introduction and supplement to the first chapter on Renaissance humanism.

In spite of this disparate origin, the volume presents itself as an organic unit, and it may and should be read as a coherent and unified treatment of its highly diversified subject. We are instructed about Renaissance humanism, the forgeries of Annius of Viterbo, Joseph Scaliger's chronology, the forgeries attributed to Hermes Trismegistus and the Sibyls, Johannes Kepler as a humanist and scientist, Isaac La Peyrère as a critic of the Old Testament, and the treatment of Homer by Friedrich August Wolf. Many other scholars are cited and discussed in passing, especially Richard Bentley. The notes are printed separately from the text, and there is no separate bibliography, but the references to the cited titles are given fully in the notes, and an index of names provides a guide to the authors discussed and, at least partly and indirectly, to the studies cited.

The main purpose of the volume, as we learn from the introduction, is to defend classical scholarship as a branch of valid knowledge against the polemical attacks of modern philosophers and scientists such as Bacon, Descartes, and their more recent successors. Another purpose is to show that the philological and historical methods developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were in many ways anticipated during the preceding centuries, especially by Renaissance humanism and its most brilliant representative, Angelo Poliziano, and, to a lesser extent, by such humanists as Petrarch, Valla, Beroaldus, and Erasmus. Grafton gives Poliziano special credit for having recognized the Greek sources of much Roman literature, and for having formulated the principle that in establishing a critical text or a historical fact only the earliest manuscripts and testimonies should be considered, whereas all later manuscripts or testimonies, when derived from the earlier ones, should be disregarded. In dealing with his material, Grafton discusses mainly problems of textual criticism and of authenticity, and he is primarily interested in literary and historical texts, although in some of his papers he also touches on mathematics and astronomy, on philosophy and theology, as well as on jurisprudence and medicine.

In discussing some of the forgeries, Grafton shows how a careful philological and historical analysis of a text may help to expose late forgeries claimed to belong to an earlier age. Giving due credit to the scholars who recognized such forgeries, Grafton also shows that they often were motivated by polemical, theological, or political considerations rather than strictly scholarly ones, and that many distinguished scholars who should have known better continued for a long time to accept such forgeries as authentic. Grafton even shows a certain sympathy for these scholars. The chapter on Scaliger is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

especially learned and acute and provides, as it were, a foretaste of the second volume of Grafton's monograph on Scaliger, which we hope will be published before long.

I fully agree with Grafton that philology and history have had for many centuries their own tradition and valid method, independent of, and different from, those of the natural sciences, and that this tradition and method should be upheld in our present "age of science." I also agree that this tradition did not begin in the nineteenth century but goes back without interruption to Renaissance humanism and also had its ancient and medieval antecedents. This tradition has been largely ignored, especially in the English-speaking world, in which the term "science" is applied to many "social sciences" that do not deserve this term but not to disciplines such as philosophy, history, and philology, which in all other modern languages are recognized as sciences. I should like to add that only a few modern philosophers, especially Croce, Collingwood, Rickert, and Cassirer, have recognized the "scientific" validity of the philosophical, historical, and philological disciplines, but in recent discussions of the subject not much attention has been paid to them.

I regret to note that Grafton, while emphasizing the contributions of many humanists, and especially of Poliziano, to classical philology, fails to give a clear and comprehensive picture of Renaissance humanism as a whole, of its relation to its medieval antecedents, and of its influence on those intellectual currents of the Renaissance that did not form a part of humanism but coexisted with it. Grafton has of course the right to select for this particular volume the authors and themes that interest him and to omit many others that don't, although they were once important for other scholars and may continue to concern them. Yet since he added to this volume a new introduction, he should have given in it a complete description of humanism and indicated the place occupied in it by those scholars and themes which he chose to treat in detail. This he completely fails to do. According to reliable contemporary sources, the *Studia humanitatis* consisted of five subjects—*grammatica*, *rhetorica*, *historia*, *poetica*, and *philosophia moralis*—and, within this scheme, the classical scholarship of the humanists clearly belongs to *grammatica* (later called *philologia*). Hence there is no reason to criticize Hans Baron because he studied the moral and political thought of the humanists, for this is a legitimate part of the humanities which was also studied by Garin, Trinkaus, and many other scholars (whereas Baron himself made his contribution to humanist philology), and the same is true of humanist rhetoric and historiography. Grafton mentions humanist poetry in the cases of Poliziano and, oddly enough, of Kepler, but does not indicate the enormous poetic literature produced by the humanists and their successors.

On the other hand, the emphasis on the philological or grammatical contributions of the humanists is not an innovation of Grafton, who merely follows the tradition of the historians of classical philology. Moreover, Grafton does not even cover all aspects of humanist *grammatica*. He fails to mention the contribution of the humanists to the study of Latin vocabulary (which includes Valla's *Elegantiae*) and their textbooks of Greek and Latin grammar (including those by Chrysoloras and Guarino). Focusing on the humanists' study of classical Greek and Roman texts, Grafton is primarily concerned with some of their commentaries and glosses, and he relies for the medieval antecedents of humanist scholarship entirely on a book by Robert Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries* (1954), whose serious errors and omissions are well known to all Renaissance specialists.

Grafton also fails to pay proper attention to some of the major areas of classical scholarship to which the humanists made some of their most monumental contributions: the new discovery of several Latin and numerous Greek authors and texts of antiquity that had been unknown to the Latin Middle Ages, and the large body of new

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Latin translations from the Greek made available by the humanists to their contemporaries and to the following centuries down to the eighteenth, when Latin continued as the language of academic instruction, and even to the nineteenth, when it was still used by classical scholars in their learned prefaces and dissertations. The humanist translations from the Greek covered not only the numerous Greek texts previously unknown (as did Poliziano's translation of several books of the *Iliad*) but also tried to replace the medieval translations of texts previously known, and the relative merits of the medieval and humanist translations—and the underlying theories of translating—have been the subject of much discussion from the fifteenth century to the present day. This translating activity, as well as the commentaries and interpretations that accompanied it, covered not only the literary and historical texts in which Grafton is primarily interested but also the ancient authors in fields such as philosophy and theology, jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics and astronomy, astrology and magic, and these works were not only done by professional humanists or philologists but also by professional philosophers, theologians, jurists, physicians, scientists, or pseudo-scientists who had acquired a humanist and philological training in addition to their professional one. Grafton cites some specimens of this work, but he is very spotty in the examples he mentions, and fails in several instances to give credit where it belongs.

In theology, Grafton treats La Peyrère's rather amateurish critique of the Old Testament but merely mentions the much more competent studies of Spinoza and Richard Simon. He also gives credit to Valla and Erasmus for their textual work on the New Testament, and he briefly mentions the apocryphal writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, but he ignores the humanist translations of Philo and of numerous works of the Greek Church Fathers. He stresses Poliziano's textual work on the *Digest*, and he mentions Alciato, but fails to acknowledge the contributions of Bolognini, of Budé, and of the French jurists of the later sixteenth century. He cites Vivian Nutton's valuable study of some textual work on Galen by John Caius, but does not mention the large body of new translations of Hippocrates and Galen on which we even have some recent literature. In stressing Kepler's connection with humanism, he is silent about the numerous new translations of scientific and pseudo-scientific works, including not only Ptolemy but also Pappus, Diophantus, and Apollonius of Perga. The ancient philosophers fare especially badly. He gives Pophryry credit for recognizing the Chaldaic Oracles and the *Hermetica* as apocryphal. But all he has to say about Florentine Platonism is to call it "the elegant nonsense of the neo-Platonists." I wonder whether he also considers the writings and doctrines of Plato and Plotinus elegant nonsense. Some of Marsilio Ficino's major contributions (he was a philosopher who came to learn Greek and to acquire a philological training) were his translations of Plato (for which he consulted Poliziano) and Plotinus, which were the first complete ones for both of these authors, superseded all other translations of their works, and were admired, reprinted, and used down to our century. Humanists and humanistically trained philosophers contributed also to the study of Aristotle and his commentators (also Poliziano lectured on Aristotle), to the Greek and Roman sources of Stoicism and Epicureanism, of Academic and Pyrrhonian Skepticism, of Middle and Neo-Platonism, and of such popular philosophical writers as Plutarch and Lucian. These humanists continued the work of Cicero and Seneca, Augustine, Boethius, and the Scholastics in developing a standard philosophical terminology in Latin (which in turn served as the basis of the philosophical terminology in all modern languages).

Also the great seventeenth-century scholar Lucas Holstenius is briefly cited for his edition of the *Passio sanctarum martyrum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, but his extensive work as editor, translator, and commentator of Middle and Neo-Platonic philosophers is not mentioned.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The only philosophical text discussed by Grafton is the *Corpus Hermeticum*, but by relying almost exclusively on a book by Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), which, in addition to its important insights, also contains several errors, Grafton fails to tell us about the textual content of the *Corpus* (*Asclepius*, *Pimander*, and *Definitiones Asclepii*). He does not indicate that the paraphrases of both the *Asclepius* and the *Pimander*, though reprinted in Ficino's *Opera* since 1561, are demonstrably not by him but by Jacobus Faber Stapulensis (Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples), or that the *Definitiones Asclepii* were translated by Ludovico Lazzarelli as a supplement to Ficino's *Pimander* (which is incomplete, as is the Greek manuscript on which it is based) and were printed in Lyon in 1507 with a commentary by Symphorien Champier.

I do not wish to exaggerate the limitations of this valuable book. The world of contemporary scholarship, threatened by a steady progress of ignorance and trendiness, should be most grateful to Grafton for the wealth of new information that he offers to us, as well as for the acute, elegant, and brilliant style of his presentation.

A poet and particularist

C. H. Sisson On the Look-out:
A Partial Autobiography.
Carcanet, 234 pages, £14.95

reviewed by Tess Lewis

C. H. Sisson opens his measured autobiography, *On the Look-out*, with characteristic skepticism.

> I have the greatest difficulty in believing in the existence of human personality, and I hardly know what sort of thing it would be if it did exist. That there are people—men and women, conveniently classified as such—I can of course see as well as the next man. But it is evident that when people talk of themselves they are thinking of something quite different. . . . I find it easier to believe in God than in the existence of personality. That puts some difficulties in the way of an autobiography.

Yet Sisson hardly finds these difficulties insurmountable, leading one to suspect that this master of feline prose, whose intellect has aptly been described by the poet David Wright as "savage, luminous and just," is wearing a wry smile. For not only is his opening salvo subtly and repeatedly contradicted throughout the autobiography but it also runs counter to the critical method he has employed to such advantage in his literary and political essays since the first was published in 1937.

In his criticism, Sisson approaches both the poet and the political writer (or *clerc*, as he would say) by setting the author's oeuvre in social, historical, and cultural context. While he neither reduces his critical subjects to a series of assimilated character traits nor works within the narrow framework of a specific psychological or sociological theory, Sisson is adamant that man is, above all, a product of his environment. And yet Sisson believes the individual is not entirely dominated by specific historical and actual conditions but that he can and should react to them; only when we have understood certain contingencies can we begin to understand the works that have arisen from and in response to them. Sisson's emphasis on the determining factors of a writer's life highlights not only the peculiarities of that life and work but also the influences and traditions that we share with the writer, similarities we are apt to overlook in a culture increasingly intent on stressing social and ethnic differences.

Sisson's most important intellectual and literary touchstones are such authors as Jonathan Swift, Montesquieu, Andrew Marvell, and, with reservations, Charles Maurras. They appeal to Sisson because, as he has written of the latter two, all "were concerned with the profound movements of history and with the institutions which matter more, in the life of peoples and of in-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dividuals, than the events which daily and weekly excite the readers of *The Times* and *The Economist*." Indeed, these are men whose personalities, *pace* Sisson, lay at the root of their distinction.

"Is not every sincere life, in a sense, a journey to the first years?" C. H. Sisson asked in an early essay on another of his much admired *clercs*, Charles Péguy. And indeed, *On the Look-out*, Sisson's most explicit of many returns to his first years, reveals a life of great sincerity. His earliest essays, though less refined, are of a piece with his more recent writings, as are the few entries he quotes from journals written in the 1930s. In one of these essays we read, "To develop a personal life it is perhaps best to fix one's eyes on impersonal values." The exploration of permanent values and a fierce commitment to the unmasking of illusion have consistently informed his poetry, criticism, and fiction over the past five decades.

Divided into three parts, *On the Look-out* begins at its story's end in 1964. The first section, written in that year and self-consciously entitled "Pretensions," recounts in reverse chronology Sisson's rise to Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Labour. Interspersed with sidelong glances at his literary accomplishments, it ends in 1945 when Sisson was released from the British army. The second section, written in 1946, is a fictional re-creation, chronological and in the third person, of the atmosphere of his two-and-a-half-year service in the British Other Ranks in India during the Second World War. The shift to a straightforward narrative chronology in this section enhances the protagonist's sense of dislocation and apparent pointlessness, giving the reader of the autobiography a sense of suspended time, a sense that Sisson himself probably experienced on his tour of duty. In the final section, the narrative picks up from his induction in 1942 and winds backward toward his birth. This partial autobiography ends with a "Letter from the Present," written, it seems, reluctantly, as Sisson considers the past two and a half decades to have been, "one way or another, years of reaping as [he] has sown" in his more significant and formative early years, and therefore of less import to an account of his life.

Charles Hubert Sisson was born to lower-middle-class parents just outside of Bristol in 1914. Originally a jeweler and watchmaker, Sisson's father became certified as an optician, due to the economic difficulties of the 1920s. Sisson early developed a taste for poetry, winning occasional prizes in his teens. While studying philosophy and English literature at the University of Bristol, he was profoundly influenced by Eliot and Pound. He was attracted not only by their poetic innovations but by the fierce independence of their critical thought and (not without recognizing their weaknesses) the courage of their political convictions. Yet it was T. E. Hulme's *Speculations* that had the greatest impact on Sisson. Hulme's anti-humanism provided a much needed and thoughtful antidote to the era's prevailing romanticism and liberalism, "sentiments" that culminated a few years later in the hegemony of the "Marxist-Liberal-littérateurs," W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and C. Day-Lewis. Daunted by *The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme*, published as an appendix to *Speculations*, and the works of several modernist poets, Sisson gave up, at the age of twenty, his aspirations of becoming a poet and applied himself to becoming a critic.

The unemployment of the Twenties and Thirties had made a strong impression on the young Sisson, leading him to share "some of the emotional attitudes of the left." Yet his impatience with what he viewed as the liberal-socialists' willful dissociation from reality soon dispelled this sympathy. Sisson's impatience grew out of his first-hand experience of the insidious effects of the illusions that gripped the popular imaginations of Europe between the Wars. Having completed his undergraduate degree in 1934, he was awarded a scholarship that sent him to Germany for a year. There Sisson heard Hitler, Goebbels, and Göring

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

speak and witnessed the hysteria and "inchoate forces [that] had been released by this devilish movement."

Upon his return to England in 1935, Sisson was awarded another scholarship, which sent him to Paris for six months. In between his preparations for the Civil Service Examination and lectures at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, he avidly read *Action Française* and the works of Charles Maurras, whom he had first encountered in the pages of Eliot's *Criterion*. Despite the limitations of Maurras's political philosophy, he remained, for his eloquent and unconditional opposition to the German threat, one of the few contemporary writers Sisson admired. Two years later Sisson's first published essay, a recommendation of select aspects of Maurras's political thought, would serve as a provocative introduction to the pages of *The New English Weekly*.

Sisson entered the Civil Service in 1936 largely by default, working in the Ministry of Labour until he enlisted in the army in 1942. It was on a troopship bound for India in the mid-1940s that poems began to force themselves on him again. In India he undertook his first extended translations, beginning with Heinrich Heine's political poems. Celebrated translations of Catullus, Virgil, Dante, Horace, Lucretius, and Du Bellay, among others, followed.

Released from the army in 1946, Sisson returned to Whitehall, where, as an increasingly outspoken critic of the Civil Service, he was made less and less welcome over the next thirty years. While resuming his essays and book reviews for *The New English Weekly*, edited by Philip Mairet, Sisson also contributed to a number of other magazines. He has since published two novels and a number of prose works, among them a study of the Civil Service entitled *The Spirit of British Administration*, a critical study of the Victorian "publicist" Walter Bagehot, and the idiosyncratic but highly respected *English Poetry, 1900-1950*.

Though admired and denounced in various quarters for his essays as well as his politics, Sisson is best known for his poetry. His first volume, *The London Zoo*, was not published until 1961. It was followed by six more volumes, a selected, and a collected volume. Remarkably, much of this formidable body of work was written in the margins of the day.

Sisson's poetry has only recently begun to receive its deserved recognition, as readers and critics have no doubt been dissuaded as much by the bleakness of his vision as by the difficulty of his verse. The themes of Christian belief and national identity underpin his poetry as they do his prose. Although his faith is deeply colored by an ingrained skepticism and his feelings toward national character are highly ambivalent, these are the two fundamental elements of his own identity. Sisson's unrelenting disillusion causes him to question the solace of faith even as he confirms it, sparing his readers no discomfort.

In a short chapter in *On the Look-out*, Sisson recalls his baptism into the Church of England, the public confirmation of an immensely enriching but complicated relationship. Though, as Sisson says of these matters, "one must always say too much or too little, or both," the reader is left wishing he had said more. The central role that the Church plays in Sisson's intellect and imagination is one of his writing's most distinguishing features, presenting his readers with aesthetic and political, as well as spiritual, challenges.

In "The Usk," for example, the poet longs for a style that would be as limpid as the Welsh stream after which the poem is named. As he struggles towards plainness of speech, the words deny themselves:

> So speech is treasured, for the things it gives
> Which I can not have, for I speak too plain
> Yet not so plain as to be understood.
> It is confusion and a madman's tongue.

Imperfect speech, spoken by fallen man, has not forfeited its divine nature, just as man holds the possibility of redemption, intimated earlier in the poem through ambiguous symbols of baptism and the Eucharist.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The subtle rhythm that weaves in and out of the poem's language establishes a unity between the possible and the real that is, however, unable to dispel the reader's doubt.

Sisson's poetry demands to be taken on its own terms. The reader must bear in mind, for example, that for the Christian writer, the Incarnation is a matter of fact and not opinion. So while a poem such as "The Usk" may border on the blasphemous in its use of Eucharistic symbols and its playing upon a divine/fallen duality of human nature and speech, the faith that inspired the poem infuses it with power and truth, bringing the reader, whatever his beliefs, to new perceptions.

While the sensibility of a particularist such as C. H. Sisson—formed by the historical, cultural, and political institutions of England—is easy to admire, it is difficult for even the most traditionalist American to appreciate him in a more visceral sense, steeped as we are in an anti-monarchist, republican political tradition. And yet Sisson's work contains essential keys to understanding our own heritage—if not always in content, certainly in method. His autobiography is a most appropriate place to begin.

Shorter notices

John Bossy Giordano Bruno
and the Embassy Affair.
Yale University Press, 294 pages, $29.95

John Bossy, Professor of History at the University of York, is a distinguished historian of Catholicism in England whose *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (1985) was a remarkably original survey of the continuities of practice and feeling across centuries of confessional strife. His latest book is something of a dark *jeu d'esprit*, plunging readers into the murky waters of Elizabethan politico-religious espionage (waters swum elsewhere by Marlowe). Bossy first sketches the career of the pseudonymous spy "Henry Fagot," a Catholic chaplain in the house of the French Ambassador in London from 1583 to 1585. "Fagot"—the name alluding to the stacked firewood atop which heretics were burned—was responsible for the delation, torture, and execution of English Catholics charged (some rightly, some not) with plotting the assassination of Queen Elizabeth and the installation of Catholic Mary of Scots upon the throne. Bossy then details the activities, in 1583-85, of Giordano Bruno, the Italian philosophical upholder of Copernicus *cum* renegade priest *cum* chaplain at the French Ambassador's in London. During these years, Bruno wrote his literary masterpiece, *La Cena de le Ceneri* (*Ash Wednesday Supper*), a Platonic dialogue that recounts—among much else—an adventurous voyage up the Thames by Bruno and friends (they're on their way to dine at Whitehall with the poet and courtier Fulke Greville). Bruno liked to play with fire. Besides the improprieties more or less hidden in *La Cena*, he enjoyed, for example, saying Mass and hearing confession, although "he despised and detested Jesus and had a special contempt for the Cross and for any form of the mass and the eucharist."

It is Bossy's thesis that Bruno and "Fagot" were one and the same person, that Bruno cheerfully betrayed what he learned as friend and confessor—betrayed to Elizabeth's Secretary of State, Sir Francis Walsingham. His motive? A consuming hatred for the papacy and corresponding worship of Elizabeth as its chief foe. Plus an empty pocket, an ingrained appetite for mischief, and a thorough contempt for his victims.

Bruno took these attitudes with him to Italy in the 1590s, where he ran afoul of the Inquisition. "He had perfectly good reason to think that papists were gullible boobies whom he could bamboozle as much as he wished. . . . He thought he was the most intelligent man of his time." But his luck ran out, and he was burned on the faggots in Rome in 1600. While, of course, deploring Bruno's barbarous end, Bossy does not scruple to conclude his short book by "saying, after more sympathetic things, that it served him right."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Does the thesis convince? Well, the author seems sincere and painstaking, but so do all conspiracy buffs when the wind is right. The case so often bogs grimly down in agonizing minutiae of handwriting and chronology and grammatical double-bluff ("the author therefore is a Spaniard; or else he is somebody seeking to give the impression that he is a Spaniard trying to write Italian") that it must be left to Elizabethan archivists and paleographers to settle.

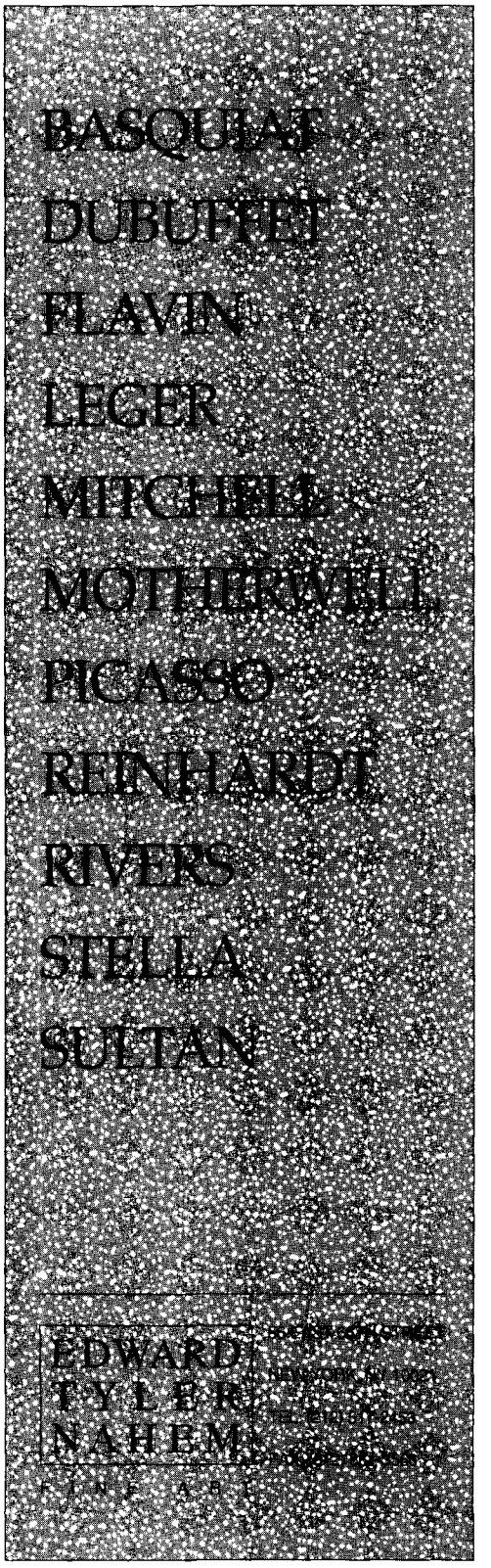
But at least the bizarre and danger-loving personality of Bruno comes through, as well a sense that some of his prose is worth recovering for philosophical *literature*, in the tradition of Plato, of More, and of Erasmus. And it is in a strange way uplifting to read of even espionage in a context of serious, life-or-death moral values—instead of, say, the trivializing nihilism of Graham Greene or the obsessive infantilism of Norman Mailer.

—*Donald Lyons*

Robert Gottlieb, editor
The Journals of John Cheever.
Knopf, 399 pages, $25

What an unenviable posthumous career John Cheever has had! In 1984, two years after his death, his daughter, Susan, rushed into print with a tell-all memoir; in 1988 came a dull biography by Scott Donaldson and a collection of letters that made Cheever seem almost doltish. The correspondence was edited (and outfitted with an astonishingly self-indulgent running commentary) by the author's son Benjamin; for the journals, the family has wisely called in a pro, Robert Gottlieb. The book, which covers the years 1948 to 1982 and contains only the twentieth part of Cheever's journals, proves to be as vibrant, poignant, and authentic as much of his fiction and as beautifully written, at its best, as anything he ever published.

It is also, alas, unrelievedly depressing. Cheever tirelessly proclaims his anxiety and gloom; his intermittent expressions of joy seem desperate. The sense of doom is awe-



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

some—he predicts that "I will end up cold, alone, dishonored, forgotten by my children" (ha!)—and awesome too is the self-hatred: "Oh, to be so much a better man than I happen to be." The main reason for this self-hatred was his homosexuality, which he saw as profane and unmanly, couldn't reconcile with his role as paterfamilias and Westchester country squire, and, as late as 1966, wouldn't even discuss with his shrink. He agonizes endlessly about the threat his sexual urges represent to his family life ("Every comely man, every bank clerk and delivery boy, was aimed at my life like a loaded pistol"), and agonizes too about the furtive affairs and heavy drinking to which those urges drove him.

When he isn't despising himself for his betrayal of marital vows, Cheever is scorning his own work. He notes in 1953 that his stories "didn't seem too good": "I . . . found pitiful evidences of poorly informed snobbism, an exaggerated wish to impress my knowledge of Army prose upon the reader, and associated with this a tendency to use verbatim conversation rather than the remarks that should be made by my characters." Reading Mailer, he despairs of his own "confined talents" and decides he's not "in the big league"; perusing reviews of Bellow, he laments that in "this big, wild, rowdy country, full of whores and prizefighters," he's "stuck with an old river in the twilight and the deterioration of the middle-aged businessman." In 1975 he reads a short-story anthology and decides its editors were right to exclude him: "The tone of the stories chosen—most of them excellent—is much more substantial and correct than my flighty, eccentric, and sometimes bitter work, with its social disenchantments, somersaults, and sudden rains."

The flip side of Cheever's self-reproach was a formidable self-absorption—a "contemptible narcissism," in his words. Though he declares his love for family and friends, they function here largely as occasions of guilt; he rarely frets about their troubles except insofar as they provide him with an opportunity to thrash himself. Nor, for all his preoccupation with the literary competition, does he have much of value to say about literature—or about art, culture, and society generally. There are frequent, and fervent, references to religion; one is surprised by Cheever's enraptured profession of faith, by the degree to which he (an Episcopalian who attended church irregularly) saw himself as a sinner tested by temptation. In a 1956 entry he tells of his prayer "to understand the transports and infirmities of my flesh; not to be spared the pain of sickness and hurt but to understand it; and to be spared the pain of what I think of as moral uncleanness." Here and throughout these annals of quiet desperation, Cheever bares depths of emotion and experience that, had he felt freer to explore them in his fiction, could have helped him to become the more substantial, less confined artist he longed to be.

—Bruce Bawer

Publisher's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $6 each. A list of highlights is available upon request from the Office Manager.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notebook

Leland Bell, 1922-1991

by Jed Perl

The painter Leland Bell—who died on September 18, after a long battle with leukemia—was vibrant, brilliant, opinionated, and absolutely sure of himself. The musical last name was just right for Lee, and not only because he was a serious amateur jazz drummer. If he called you on the phone he would identify himself very fast—"This is Lee Bell"—and coming over the receiver in his gravelly voice it was a sonorous bang-bang, exciting and also, as bells can be, jarring. When Lee talked about the artists he loved (and how he loved to talk) it was like bells ringing, ringing in praise of Corot, Derain, Mondrian, Cranach, Rouault, Rembrandt, Arp, Chardin, Dufy, and many, many more. Lee's best paintings have that clattering, jarring, exciting bell-like quality, too. He liked to fill a painting with just a few ringing planes of color. In the big, powerful figure compositions that he showed a year and a half before he died, those planes were all he needed to send arms, legs, faces into a beautiful, manic dance. The day after Leland died, the phone kept ringing, and the friends who were calling couldn't believe—despite the fact that he had been near death more than once in the past couple of years—that Leland Bell had actually gone.

Leland was born in Cambridge, Maryland, in 1922. He met the painter Karl Knaths at the Phillips Collection, which he frequented when he was a high-school student in Washington, D.C., and became a sort of disciple of Knaths's and acquired from the American modernist an understanding of the work of Paul Klee and other European modernists. Bell was living in New York by the early 1940s, where he met and married the painter Louisa Matthiasdottir, an Icelander who was studying at the Hofmann school. Ulla—as everybody calls Louisa—was with Leland when he died. They were married more than forty-five years, and these two marvelous painters, showing so regularly, arriving at openings together, leaving their names in the gallery guestbooks one beneath the other—they have been one of the sure things.

I don't really want to say more of a biographical nature, because it would seem to turn Lee into a picturesque character out of some lost New York art world. No one was more present-tense than he. No one had more of a horror of pieties, of sentimentality. I remember Leland on an artists' panel at the Educational Alliance downtown sometime in the mid-Seventies. At one moment during the evening, Alice Neel, sitting in the front row, raised her hand and asked, "What about Siqueiros?" Siqueiros had died recently. Leland said he didn't like Siqueiros's work. Then Alice Neel started to make some observations about Siqueiros's historical importance, his death. And Leland came to the edge of the low platform and, towering over Neel, shouted, "Alice! Youth. Age. That stuff means nothing." To Lee, all that mattered was living and painting and talking about painting, and Lee did these

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

things for as long as he could. In the last couple of years we all wondered how he could keep on. But he did, and he painted some of his best paintings.

Leland was, both in his art and in his lectures and teaching, one of the great simplifiers. That was his spark of genius. He believed that everything in painting depended on the rhythms—on the way that lines and color shapes carry our eye through space. While he was too much of an intellectual not to know that art would die without its metaphors, its narratives, its psychological insights, he was at heart an idealist: he couldn't help feeling that metaphor, narrative, psychology were so many masks, separating us from the truth. He was always pushing himself—and the rest of us—toward the rock-hard essence of art: what Mondrian called the pure plastic relations. Rhythm was the life principle. One's reservations about Lee generally had something to do with the idea that he didn't know what to do with metaphors, narratives, psychology. But it is in part the function of the great simplifiers to force the rest of us to insist on the complications, and, because there was nothing simplistic about Lee's taste for simplicity, he forced us to sharpen our arguments. While many of his ideas about painting were derived from the stripped-down aesthetics of abstract art, he embraced representation, probably because when he was painting his own face or the world around him he couldn't, despite his insistence on simplification, entirely deny the metaphors, the narratives, the psychology. He made simplicity complicated.

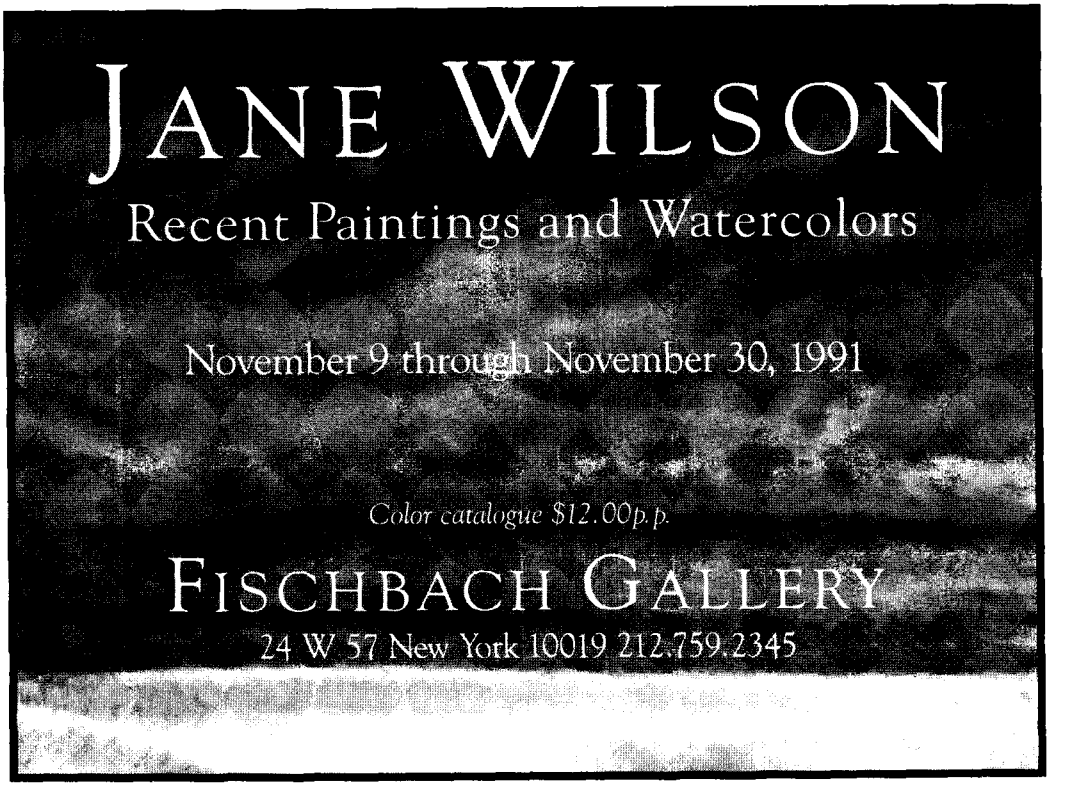
The first time I heard Leland lecture, at the Studio School in 1971, I didn't quite know what he was talking about, but I felt in my bones that it was important. I remember he talked about the rhythm of sailboats in a painting by Dufy, about the placement of the head in a portrait of Titus by Rembrandt. As a lecturer, he used his whole body—and that jazz-hipster's turn of phrase of his—to describe the hopping, swinging, sliding journeys that his eyes took across a painting. He had a way of bringing out the time element in painting—the way we experience a painting as an unfolding journey. He was a great teacher because he helped us to analyze the pleasure we feel instinctively as our eyes move around a painting.

After one had heard Leland speak a number of times one didn't necessarily need to go hear a lot more of his lectures, because by then his way of seeing had become a part of one's own. But one always sent young artists to hear him, and if they were intelligent they came back from their first Leland lecture wild-eyed with excitement. Leland said one big true thing over and over again, but he was not repeating himself—rather, he was re-examining the art that he loved and finding it to be unchanged, structurally sound.

It was in his own work that he struggled to progress, to change. He was fiercely attached to certain motifs—the group of figures around a table, the couple in a bedroom. Over the years, as he worked and reworked these quotidian scenes, he was trying to liberate their essential rhythms. His obsession with the self-portrait had similar roots: he wanted to find out what was essential to his face. And, as the work became increasingly iconic, sometimes almost austere, major paintings emerged. When his last show opened at Robert Schoelkopf Gallery on a dark rainy Saturday the artist's friends were exhilarated: Lee had finally pushed his big figure compositions into greatness.

There is much more that could be said about Leland's forty-odd years in the art world: about his hell-raising against the museums, which he frequently (and quite justly) believed were showing the wrong work or presenting the right work in the wrong way; about the many women artists who saw in Leland's insistence on making tradition modern an opening for *them*; about the people who in recent years have damned Lee with faint praise, as if he were nothing more than a charming aging dissenter. But I think I've covered most of the essentials, and I really don't know what else there is to say except that it was always good to know that Leland was hard at work in his studio on Sixteenth Street.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


JANE WILSON
Recent Paintings and Watercolors
November 9 through November 30, 1991
Color catalogue $12.00p.p.
FISCHBACH GALLERY
24 W 57 New York 10019 212.759.2345

Richard Diebenkorn

New Work

November 2 to November 30, 1991

Knoedler & Company

19 East 70 Street, New York Telephone (212) 794-0550

Fully illustrated catalog available

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dolan/Maxwell

Philadelphia

Distinguished Contemporary and Modern Works on Paper

Norman Ackroyd
Milton Avery
Morris Blackburn
Dean Dass
Carroll Dunham
Mary Beth Edelson
Claes Eklundh
Eric Fischl
Bill Freeland
Sam Gilliam
Anthony-Petr Górny
Stanley William Hayter
Joseph Hecht
David Hockney
Jane Kent
Robert Keyser
Winifred Lutz
Michael Manzavrakos
Mick Moon
Robert Motherwell
Elizabeth Murray
John Newman
Ben Nicholson
Wally Reinhardt
Nigel Rolfe
Susan Rothenberg
David Shapiro
Steven Sorman
Robert Stackhouse
Frank Stella
Stephen Talasnik
Claire Van Vliet
Terry Winters

BY APPOINTMENT

PHONE: 215, 732.7787 FAX: 215, 790.1866

The American Fine Arts Society

presents an exhibition of sculptures by

CHARLES CARY RUMSEY (1879-1922)

and works by A FAMILY OF ARTISTS: Phyllis Harriman Mason, Frank Mason, Arden Mason, Cecilia Rumsey, Evelyn Rumsey Lord, Mary Rumsey and Alexandra Whitney.

In the gallery of The Art Students League of New York,
215 West 57th Street, N.Y.C. 10019. (212-247-4510)

Gallery hours: M–F: 10:00 A.M.–7:00 P.M.
Sat: 10:00 A.M.–4:00 P.M.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

American Painters in Giverny

In conjunction with the preparation

of a book on the art colony in Giverny, France,

Dr. William H. Gerdts would be interested in receiving information

on the whereabouts of Giverny paintings by American and other artists

as well as related documentary and biographical material.

Please contact: Dr. William H. Gerdts

Room B-03, Graduate Center, C.U.N.Y.

33 West 42nd Street, New York NY 10036 Fax (212) 427-6775

KARL ZERBE

Selections

EILEEN RITA

Recent landscapes in oil pastel

November 2–27

SID DEUTSCH GALLERY

29 West 57th Street / New York, N.Y. 10019 / (212) 754-6660

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ART CRITICISM

NEW FROM CALIFORNIA

Out of Eden

Essays On Modern Art

W. S. Di PIERO

"The writing is superb, the insights come with astonishing and rich rapidity, and the moral and intellectual intelligence behind them strikes me as unflinchingly honest and scrupulous." —Reginald Gibbons, Editor, *TriQuarterly*

$29.95 cloth, 269 pages, illustrated

Art As Art

The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt

Edited by BARBARA ROSE

"Rose in the introduction suggests that Reinhardt's ultimate value is as 'a prophet of the realization that high art can only endure as spiritual art.' Well, maybe, but his copious writings are also exuberant, ironic, rancorous and parodistic and, as such, a marvelous commentary on the recent art world."—*The Nation*

$12.95 paper, 253 pages, illustrated

Topics of Our Time

Comments on Twentieth-Century Issues in Learning and in Art

E. H. GOMBRICH

Gombrich has been described as one of the most distinctive voices of his generation. From a critique of cultural relativism, to praise for works and artists outside the mainstream, his essays provide a searching and learned perspective on intellectual and artistic values at century's end.

$39.95 cloth, 224 pages, illustrated

The Hydrogen Jukebox

Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978-1990

Edited by MaLin Wilson with an Introduction by Robert Storr

"Schjeldahl is the finest journalistic art critic at work today."—*Los Angeles Times*

Entertaining and poetic, Peter Schjeldahl continues the modern tradition of art criticism crafted by poet-critics.

Lannan Series, 2

$29.95 cloth, 380 pages

Arshile Gorky

The Implications of Symbols

HARRY RAND

"So sweeping is Mr. Rand's interpretation of Gorky's oeuvre, and so convincing his argument on its behalf, that it instantly makes virtually all other commentaries on the artist obsolete. . . . Indispensable." —Hilton Kramer, *The New York Times Book Review*

$60.00 cloth, $24.95 paper, 270 pages, illustrated

Manet's Contemplation at the Gare Saint-Lazare

HARRY RAND

"Rand has identified brilliantly the sources of Manet's talent for outraging his critics and befuddling even his advocates. . . . Strikingly and coolly presented." —*The French Review*

$17.95 paper, 168 pages, illustrated

At bookstores or order toll-free 1-800-822-6657. Visa & MasterCard only.

University of California Press

Berkeley Los Angeles New York Oxford

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RECENT PAINTINGS

Through December 7

"Here is an American artist of real distinction.... these are extraordinarily beautiful (paintings)."

– Robert Hughes
Time Magazine
11.12.90

© Photograph by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

ACA GALLERIES

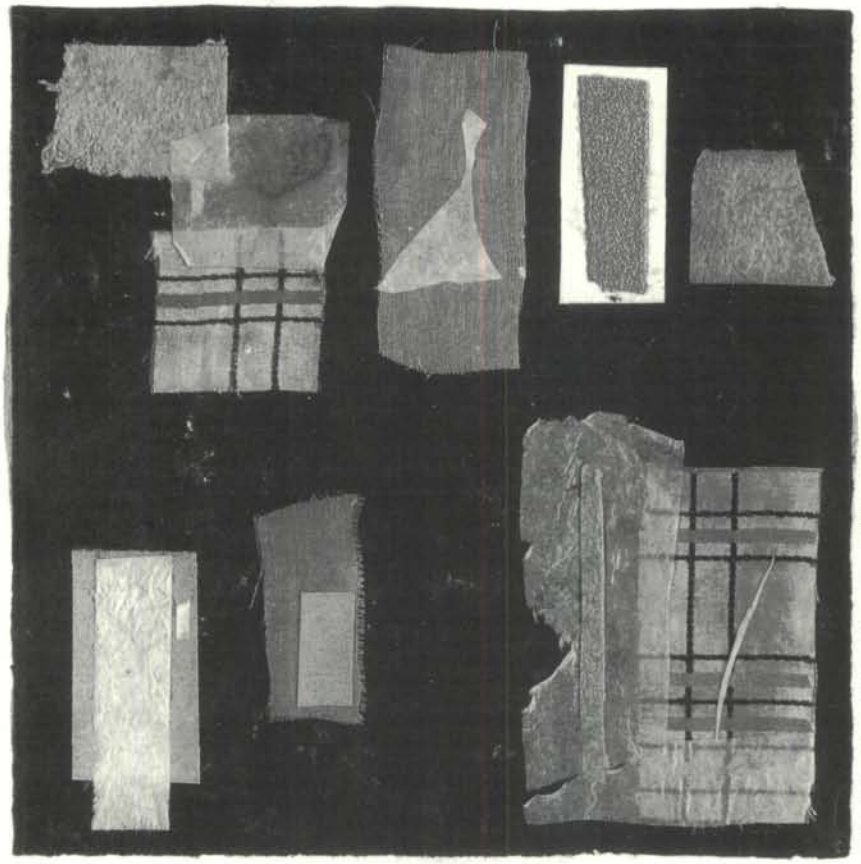
41 EAST 57TH STREET · 7TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10022
212-644-8300
FACSIMILE 212-644-8306

RICHARD POUSETTE-DART

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ANNE RYAN

Selections from Three Museums, November 5–30



Untitled No. 98, c. 1948–54, collage, 6¾" × 6⅞"
Collection Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis, Gift of Elizabeth McFadden, 1979.

WASHBURN GALLERY

41 East 57th Street New York 10022

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

Second Class Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED